

THE HIGHWAYMAN'S DAUGHTER

KATHLEEN A. SHOESMITH



*A masked bandit sets off a chain of incidents
that forces a young girl to question her heritage—
and her hopes for happiness in the future*

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Antonia walked in a leisurely manner, the basket swinging from one hand, delighting in the feel of the sun. The brambles were laden with ripe berries, and she began to pick them.

The basket was almost half-full when Antonia halted in her task, disturbed by the sound of voices. She retreated hastily behind a bush, not wishing to be seen in her juice-stained state. She cannoned heavily into something solid and gave a muffled exclamation. Then her eyes lighted upon a pair of booted feet. With a gasp of shock, she realized that she had collided not with a tree but with a man!

"Sh-sh!" murmured Justin Garth. Antonia stared up in sheer amazement and opened her mouth to speak. But he was holding her in front of him with one arm, whilst his free hand had sealed her lips, thus ensuring that she obeyed his demand for silence. Forced to lean back against his broad chest, Antonia felt a tremor of some unnamed emotion run through her. . . .

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CHAPTER ONE

THE heavy family-coach lurched and rattled its uneven way along the rutted surface of the country road. For the past two weeks the weather had been exceptionally fine and dry and the normally muddy lane had hardened into a mass of ridges, cracks and miniature pits into which a horse might quite easily place an unwary hoof. Although the late summer night was warm and the moonlit sky was studded with bright stars, the occupants of the coach had prudently kept the windows closed against dust-clouds. Four people were seated within the stuffy, enclosed interior: a plump matron of uncertain age, two younger ladies and a tall, slim-shouldered youth. The youngest of the ladies obviously did not approve of the closed windows and was making her opinions known in a complaining tone.

“Oh, Mama!” she protested. “Can we not open the windows just the merest crack? I vow I am half-stifled in here! It is such a pretty evening, yet we are not allowed to enjoy it—what with this ridiculously fast journey and the complete lack of fresh air.” She paused to take in a breath of the despised air, then went on in grumbling accents. “Will no one bid Gilchrist slow

down the horses before our bones are shaken apart? Must the evening be spoiled by ending in a *race* for home?"

She fell silent at last, realising that she had not gained the attention of her three companions.

"I vow no one ever listens to a word I say!" she said pettishly.

Her mother smiled indulgently and fanned herself with a gloved hand.

"You say so very many words, Clarissa, my love," she sighed. "Of course it is a trifle close in here, but you must surely recollect that we have had no rain of late? Imagine the clouds of dust which would attack our throats *and* ruin your pretty new gown, should we be so foolish as to think of opening windows!" She beamed round at her companions. "As for bidding Gilchrist slow his pace—I vow I dare not! Even here in Yorkshire we must not be careless. Any number of truly *desperate* highwaymen might be lying in wait for us! Depend upon it, Clarissa, Gilchrist knows what he is about. It is prudent to drive speedily at night. It would be a bold highwayman who would endeavour to halt a *fast* coach!"

Her daughter pouted and muttered something about a possible hold-up enlivening this tedious existence in the country. She would as lief meet a highwayman as go on in this boring manner for ever! She turned her fair head to stare sulkily out into the moonlit night, while the two silent travellers exchanged humorous looks at her expense.

These last two were very much alike in appearance and it was obvious that they were brother and sister.

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The lady, although not beautiful in any conventional manner, possessed a pair of fine grey eyes, fringed with thick lashes which were somewhat darker than her soft brown hair. Perhaps her nose was too short and her mouth too wide for actual beauty, but there was something about her which compelled a second look.

Her brother's eyes were also grey but lacked her calmness of expression. His hair, tied at his nape in defiance of the fashion for wigs, was of so light a brown that it appeared to be almost as fair as that of the younger lady, Clarissa.

The coach bowed along unevenly and its occupants were silent for a time, busy with their separate thoughts, as they clung on grimly to prevent themselves being hurled into the gap between the two facing seats.

Antonia Rawling switched her gaze from her aunt and her cousin Clarissa to direct her grey eyes at the mysterious dim-seen shapes of hedges, trees and bushes which flanked the country road. Then, with an effort, she gave her attentions to her companions, saying teasingly:

"Have you truly heard of highwaymen recently in our quiet corner of Yorkshire, Aunt Hetta? I am convinced that Gilchrist has no thought of them! The poor man is merely eager to be home, for the dust of which you speak is doubtless choking him, up there on his lonely box. He will be glad to refresh himself with a cup of ale, I'll warrant! What do you say, Kit?"

Her brother grinned.

"I'd as lief be up there with him, dust or no, than stay cooped up in this airless place," he confessed. "He's an interesting fellow is Gilchrist. He's full of tales to

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while away a tedious journey. I'd sooner talk with him than sit with a parcel of females," he added frankly.

Antonia gave a suppressed choke of laughter.

"Ever truthful, rarely tactful, brother mine!" she murmured, then schooled herself not to smile when her aunt and cousin tutted at Kit's forthright manner.

Mrs. Henrietta Wade shook her head indulgently at her unrepentant nephew.

"You would not wish to exchange the company of your own relatives for that of a mere low-born servant? Do not tell me *that*, Christopher!" she demanded seriously.

Her daughter, the fair-haired Clarissa, gave her two cousins an unladylike scowl.

"Both Kit and Tonia cosset the man Gilchrist," she complained. "It is a wonder that he ever remembers his place. They treat him as an equal."

Antonia smiled gently at the younger girl's disgust and refused, as was her way, to be drawn into argument. Kit, however, could not resist an angry retort.

"Gilchrist is a particular friend of mine," he said heatedly. "I do not know what you feel his *place* to be, Clarissa. A friend *is* an equal, after all!" He scowled across at his cousin, appearing younger than his nineteen years. "I'll have you know, Clarissa, he knows more about horses than you ever will."

"Oh—*horses!*" said Clarissa, her lip curling disparagingly.

Antonia intervened hastily. She knew from experience that this fruitless bickering could outlast the journey if conversation were not directed into other channels.

"It was quite an enjoyable evening, was it not?" she

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asked of Mrs. Wade, ignoring her younger companions.

Aunt Hetta started as if she had been upon the point of dropping off to sleep.

"Oh—indeed, yes!" she agreed brightly, once the remark had been repeated. "I do wish that you children would accept more invitations of this nature. We are far too quiet and secluded, tucked away at Rawling House!"

Kit and Clarissa fell resignedly silent and Antonia smiled when her brother offered her a rueful wink. Aunt Hetta would talk interminably now of the evening's excursion. She was a redoubtable talker and—as Kit inelegantly put it—no one else would now be able to slide in a word cornerwise! He was well used to his sister's timely interventions in his quarrels with Clarissa.

"Of course, we must offer the Bowdens a return of hospitality," chattered on Henrietta Wade. "Naturally our invitation must include those two charming young men who are their guests! Imagine—they are both unmarried and must be reasonably wealthy or Alice Bowden would not trouble herself with them. I fancy she feels she might secure them as husbands for those two plain-faced daughters of hers! Well, I have my Clarissa to settle also—and *you*, my love," turning to her daughter, "are prettier by far than any child of Alice Bowden could expect to make claim."

Antonia and Kit exchanged surreptitious smiles and Kit nudged his sister with his elbow. Clarissa, however, was all eagerness now, her dispute with her cousin forgotten.

"It is quite an event to have an eligible new man in

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this district," she owned, sitting up more erectly in her seat. "And, think—there are *two* of them. It is almost too good to be true!"

"I am sure that Mrs. Bowden agrees with you," said Antonia calmly, although her grey eyes danced with laughter. "Patricia and Caroline may not be beauties, but they are agreeable, good-natured girls for all that. How delightful if Mrs. Bowden can see them happy with husbands who are both handsome and wealthy!"

Kit gave a hoot of unmannerly mirth and Clarissa glared at him, her blue eyes flashing fire.

"If the Bowdens were less old-fashioned, they would have had dancing instead of all that dreary old singing and playing of instruments," she declared with a toss of her fair curls. "I am convinced that both of the Mr. Garths would have danced with *me* before they asked Carrie or Patsy."

"*Both* of them?" murmured Antonia solemnly. "How very greedy of you, love! I had not thought you would wish to dance with two men at once, however eligible they might be!"

Mrs. Wade smiled fondly at her daughter, then turned to her niece.

"Clarissa's looks should take her far, should they not?" she said. "Antonia, my dear, if you were not settled with dear Mr. Drew, then perhaps we might have considered the elder Mr. Garth—Justin—for *you*. I'd as lief have the younger one for my Clarissa. I gather he has some expectation of a *title*!"

"I would not presume so much upon a first meeting, Aunt Hetta," warned Antonia affectionately, hiding a

smile. "The gentlemen may not plan to stay long in the district, after all."

Clarissa sniffed.

"It is all very well for you, Tonia," she muttered. "You have your dreary old William Drew. You are *settled*."

Antonia stiffened fractionally but her smile did not waver.

"Poor Clarissa!" she sighed. "It would seem that I am but dreary company this evening, with my *dreary* singing and playing and now my *dreary* Mr. Drew!"

"And as for them not staying long in the district," went on Henrietta Wade, as if no one else had spoken, "why, we must ensure that they do not *wish* to leave yet! We must entertain them so splendidly that they cannot tear themselves away from us! Antonia, you must help your cousin to have the opportunity of becoming acquainted with Dominic, the younger gentleman."

"I?" asked Antonia in genuine surprise. "But how may I help, Aunt Hetta?"

Henrietta Wade nodded comfortably.

"You must cultivate Justin Garth," she said calmly. "If he is attracted to *you*, then naturally he will not wish to leave in a hurry! His cousin will also stay and will fall agreeably into the company of my Clarissa! Oh—do not speak of your Mr. Drew, Antonia. It should not be necessary for Justin Garth to realise that you might already be *promised*."

Antonia could not suppress an indrawn breath of anger. How like Aunt Hetta to suppose that everyone

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would go to the most fantastical lengths to keep this heir-to-a-title within Clarissa's grasp! How dared she assume that Antonia would do her utmost to attract the older Mr. Garth for this unworthy end? With difficulty she held her tongue.

Kit, who had appeared to take little heed of the conversation, was peering out through the window.

"We are almost home," he announced, "and I for one am glad the evening is over. It was not at all my idea of entertainment. I do not like to stand about listening to screeching females wailing love-songs—your pardon, Tonia—and pretending that I enjoy it. As for Justin and Dominic Garth—they may be men of fashion with their wigs and embroidered waistcoats, but *I* judge a man by more than mere appearance. Perhaps they are the type who grace a drawing-room more successfully than they sit a horse!"

With this lordly observation, he turned back to the window, then exclaimed excitedly:

"There is someone coming up behind us at a thundering rate. I hope, if it is a carriage, that the driver will not be reckless enough to attempt to pass! The lane is too narrow. We will end up in the ditch!"

Clarissa and her mother uttered squeaks of alarm as Kit stood up to attract the attention of Gilchrist on the driver's box. Even as he did so, there came the sound of a shot and a roughly shouted command.

The coach came to an abrupt halt and Kit fell forwards, rapping his head smartly on the window-frame. He gave a groan and subsided on to his seat. Henrietta Wade gave a shuddering sigh and swooned limply into

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her corner, while Antonia found herself sitting on the floor of the coach with a shrieking Clarissa on top of her.

It took several moments for Antonia to reseal her hysterical cousin, to bid her attend to her mother, and to turn anxiously to the unconscious Kit. In the act of performing these tasks, she found the door of the coach had been thrown open. A breath of welcome cool air greeted her and she raised her head, expecting to see Gilchrist the coachman. Instead, she found herself staring in amazement at a pistol which pointed steadily in her direction.

Her startled eyes travelled up the barrel of the pistol, up a dark-clad arm, then came to rest on a masked face. Through the slits of the mask, eyes regarded her for a full minute before the man opened his mouth and said firmly:

“Stand and deliver!”

Antonia's first feeling was one of extreme anger at the man's irresponsibility.

“Did *you* halt the coach?” she snapped. “Look at what you have done! My brother is knocked unconscious, my aunt is in a swoon and my cousin has hysterics. Yet all you can say is ‘Stand and deliver’ in that play-acting fashion! Have you *any* common sense?”

She thought that the man's lips quirked up at the corners, but he did not reply. Sharply she went on:

“And where is Gilchrist? If you have harmed him, I will gladly see you hang in York for this night's work! Clarissa,” she added impatiently, shaking her cousin

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by the arm, "everything is all right, so do cease that horrid noise! I am attempting to speak to this foolish highwayman."

When she turned back her head from her now sobbing cousin, she found not one but two masked men staring in at her.

Anger gave her courage.

"You have made a bad mistake," she told them stiffly. "This is not Hounslow Heath where the fashionable London folk ride bedecked in jewels." Her hand flew to her throat. "You shall not have my mother's pearls and there is nothing else of value here."

The two men still regarded her in watchful silence.

"I am surprised to find two grown men masquerading in this foolish dress," she went on hardily. "Do you not realise the penalty for your behaviour? Can you not learn an honest trade and earn a fair living?"

The first man gave what sounded like a choke of laughter. "She has spirit, at least," he said to his companion. "Is she the one?"

His voice was odd and muffled as if he strove to disguise it. When his companion gave a brief nod, he thrust his pistol purposefully at Antonia.

"Out you get, miss!" he said brusquely. "Watch your step now and no tricks."

Antonia stared back at the speaker. He sat easily in the saddle of his black horse and held the pistol with seeming carelessness. He was obviously younger than his silent companion, for his jawline, beneath the mask, was firm and unpocked. His chin bore an unmistakable cleft and his lips had a humorous set.

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"You wish me to get out of the coach?" she faltered incredulously, a first thrill of fear assailing her. These dark-clad men were oddly purposeful upon their black horses. For what reason had they stopped the coach? So far neither of them had demanded money or trinkets, as she had supposed would be their intention. Indeed, they seemed singularly uninterested in her mother's pearls! It would appear that they wanted *her*, for one of them had said, 'Is she the one?' as if they had expected to find her here.

She heard Kit groan behind her and looked at him anxiously.

"Get out, girl!" said the older man, speaking for the first time in a low voice. "You must come with me. My friend here will see that your coachman attends to your companions. No harm will come to any of you, if you do as you are bid."

The horses backed away leaving room for Antonia to jump down unaided on to the dusty road. Her heart was pounding furiously but she was reassured when she saw that Gilchrist was standing, apparently unharmed, beside the horses. The elderly coachman was shaking with suppressed rage and muttering beneath his breath his opinion of highwaymen in general and of these two in particular. When he observed Kit's plight, he pushed unceremoniously past the horsemen to attend to the hurts of the boy he had known since babyhood.

Antonia hesitated upon the rutted road, her gloved hands clenched tightly together. The younger highwayman dismounted, but the older man stayed upon his horse and turned it away towards the shelter of a group of trees. It was obvious that he expected her to follow

him. His companion, who appeared to be well above average height, now that she saw him upon his feet, waved his pistol warningly at her.

"Go after him, miss," he ordered, then added in a surprisingly gentle tone: "He told the simple truth. He wishes no harm but he must talk with you."

With many a backward glance at the stationary coach, the restless snorting horses which appeared to have been tethered to a bush, and the sombre figure of the young highwayman, she went across the rough ground, holding her skirts before her. In the bright moonlight she could easily see the man on horseback in front of her. When he reached the shadow of the trees he dismounted and turned towards her silently, his gloved hand upon the reins of his night-black horse.

Antonia halted, her breath held tensely, her whole body stiff with apprehension. The man was not very much taller than she was, but then she had always deplored her own height as unfeminine. Much of his face was obscured by a mask and a dark bicorne hat sat low on his brow. The only touch of relief to the scene was a star-shaped white mark upon the head of his silent horse. Antonia drew in a deep steadying breath.

"Well, sir?" she said evenly. "I trust you have good reason for this outrageous behaviour? Please speak if you must, for I wish to go back to my brother. He struck his head when the coach came to so violent a halt."

Her eyes were accusing in the moonlight.

"Kit will take no harm," said the man calmly, his voice low and assured. "Now listen well, Antonia Rawling. This is no chance hold-up. I've no desire to demand your bits and pieces of jewellery, so rest easy on that score."

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She looked up at him, a frown on her smooth brow.

"You know us by name—my brother and I," she said slowly. "Who are you? Would you have me believe you are not a highwayman, after all?"

She was rewarded by a bitter laugh.

"Oh, I am a gentleman of the road, right enough," he said harshly. "That is not in dispute, though I doubt you'll dance at my hanging for some time yet."

Antonia gave a grimace of distaste.

"It would seem you have little regard for your life, sir," she observed quietly. "Yet surely there is someone who would care if you were to die upon the gallows? Have you no wife or child to mourn and chide you for your foolhardiness?"

She felt his eyes upon her in the shadows.

"There is someone who might mourn me," he admitted. "It is to this end that I stopped your coach tonight. You see, I wish a service of you, Antonia Rawling. There is something I would have you do for me. Listen well, for I am assured you will not deny me, once you've heard the whole of it. Something is at stake for both of us, girl!"

Antonia shivered, more from unease than from physical cold. This shadowy spot beneath the trees was oddly isolated, giving the impression that just she and this strangely garbed man were alone in an empty world. She listened, as if hypnotised, as the man's voice went on steadily and inexorably. He spoke almost without expression. As she stood before him, Antonia found that she was clenching her gloved hands tightly. She tried not to let him see the effect of his revelations upon her, but trembled despite her own resolution, as he went on in low, measured tones.

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"That is enough for the present," he finished at last. "You will return home and speak to no one of what has passed between us. I will approach you again when the time comes. You would be advised to do as I ask. I am confident that you will not fail me."

Antonia stared numbly at him, her normal calm and confidence deserting her. For once she was at a loss for words.

"How—how can I be sure that you have spoken the truth?" she managed finally, a quiver in her voice.

He gave a harsh laugh.

"How can you be sure that I have lied?" he countered mockingly. "You will obey me, Antonia Rawling, for you have no other choice. Come—let us not be bad friends, for fate has linked us together, girl. Will you not shake my hand in token of good faith?"

She fell back a step, thrusting both of her hands behind her back.

"There can be no good faith between us," she said tautly. "If I do as you ask, it will be for Kit's sake, not for my own, and certainly not for yours. If you have said your say, then let us not delay another moment," she went on. "You know full well that I cannot be sure that you have lied to me. For the moment you have the upper hand, sir, but do not expect *friendship* of me!"

She turned to leave him and heard him give an unwilling laugh.

"Spirit indeed, my fine lady!" he approved. "There is something of your mother in you."

Antonia glared at him, her grey eyes cold in the moonlight. He swung himself back into the saddle, moving stiffly in the manner of one well past youth.

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"By what name are you known?" she murmured suddenly. "Perhaps I may have seen your name upon a handbill offering a reward for your capture."

She retreated from his restless horse as he leaned forwards to pat its neck. He indicated the mark on the animal's head.

"You see this?" he said. "It is my lucky star. I am Captain Starr, and well known in certain parts, although you will not have seen my likeness on handbills in Yorkshire."

She was startled to realise that there was a kind of pride in his tone as he referred to his fame.

"Perhaps the ballad-makers will write you a fine verse at your hanging!" she retorted.

"Ah—but *you* would not betray me, would you, Antonia?" he murmured softly. "Even a highwayman is allowed his gallows-speech. You could not be sure of what I would speak, now could you? What of your brother then, Antonia Rawling?"

She bit her lip, then retraced her steps back to the coach, conscious that the horse and rider were close upon her heels. It was a relief to approach the coach once more. Gilchrist was back upon his box and the coach's occupants appeared to have recovered from their various indispositions. Indeed, Clarissa was smiling at the young highwayman as he bent his head to kiss her hand, his pistol never wavering as it pointed at the white-faced indignant Kit.

Antonia's eyes took in the scene rapidly. The younger masked man remounted on her approach, relinquishing Clarissa's hand as he did so.

"Tonia!" gasped Kit in relief. "Are you harmed?"

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He did not lay hands upon you? When I came to my senses I could not believe that the villain had carried you off."

Poor Kit, thought Antonia compassionately. She made a fervent resolve that she would do anything in her power to keep her brother in ignorance of the highwayman's disclosures.

"I am perfectly all right!" she said reassuringly, then climbed up into the coach and resumed her seat composedly, ignoring the helping hand of the younger highwayman. The older man stayed at some small distance from the coach. She did not look at him, but she could feel his eyes upon her mockingly. He knew that she would not dare to disobey him!

The coach door was slammed shut behind her. Unwillingly she looked out through the window at the two sombrely dressed men who hid in comfortable anonymity behind their concealing masks. The older man raised a hand in a mocking gesture.

"Until our next meeting, Antonia Rawling!" he called meaningfully.

Apparently Gilchrist was given permission to move for the coach rattled off over the ruts once more. Antonia sat as if carved from stone, ignoring her aunt's twittering questions, her cousin's foolish comments on the gallantry of the younger highwayman and the very real concern of her brother Kit. Fortunately none of them commented on the highwayman's parting words. Perhaps they had not heard him.

Tonight's meeting was like a menacing storm-cloud to the peaceful existence which had been theirs. Antonia did not try to deceive herself that Captain Starr

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had lied. In spite of herself she had been obliged to believe his shattering revelations. A storm-cloud was indeed above all of their heads, she thought soberly. Only by complying with his outrageous demands could she hope to shield her home and her relatives from a lightning flash of scandal.

As the coach rumbled on towards Rawling House, Antonia's ears were deaf to the questions of her companions, but they could not ignore the way in which the wheels were beating out the rhythm of Captain Starr's parting threat:

"Until our next meeting, Antonia Rawling! *Until our next meeting!*"

CHAPTER TWO

FOR the next two days Henrietta Wade kept to her bed, declaring that the shocking affair of the highwayman had quite upset her. Clarissa appeared to be lost in a daydream—doubtless of the young masked man who had kissed her hand, while Kit fumed in helpless rage at the situation.

“Gilchrist tells me that a decade ago there was a flourishing horse-patrol law enforcement arrangement which dealt effectively with highway robbers,” he said bitterly to Antonia. “Today there is no one to whom we may successfully complain! It seems that the Government is better able to support the nuisance of highwaymen than to give the necessary funds to re-start the horse-patrol. It passes all reason, Tonia!”

Antonia sighed wearily and tried to give her full attention to the indignant Kit.

“There is no call to make such a to-do of the affair, love,” she said persuasively. “After all—we were neither robbed nor harmed.”

Kit frowned at her.

“It was an odd thing altogether,” he said, unappeased. “Had I been conscious I would never have allowed that rough fellow to take you off as he did. You do not seem to realise the unpleasant fate which might have befallen you, Tonia.”

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"Nothing happened, love," she said patiently. "I cannot fail to admit that it was odd, just the same! He wished to speak with one of us. I was only chosen because you, Aunt Hetta and Clarissa were variably indisposed. Be assured that he did not single me out because he had designs upon me, Kit! He was interested in our identities. I doubt there can ever be ill consequences from that meeting," she added untruthfully. She had, in fact, every reason to dread the consequences of that evening, but trusted that Kit should never learn of them.

Her brother scowled at her in disbelief.

"There is something you are hiding from me, Tonia," he said aggrievedly. "I am not Clarissa or Aunt Hetta to be fobbed-off so easily!"

She forced herself to smile.

"You are making much out of little, Kit," she said gently. "He did not take my pearls nor did he lay hands upon me! Perhaps he was weary of robbery and wished for a little conversation instead."

Kit muttered darkly that he was not to be fooled but that he would not question if she wished to keep the highwayman's purpose secret.

"Purpose, love?" echoed Antonia uneasily. "Are you completely recovered from that knock upon the head? What *purpose* could a highwayman have had with us?"

Brother and sister had been talking together in the large dim room which was Rawling House's library. At this point Kit left, muttering sulkily that Antonia could keep her secrets if she wished, for he was going down to the stables to talk with Gilchrist.

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Left alone within the shelf-lined room of books which were read now by no one but herself, Antonia gave a heavy sigh. Surely she had enough to bear without her brother having a childish fit of the sulks? Poor Kit—he was well aware that she had not told him the whole truth about her encounter with the highwayman!

She drew out an ancient leather-bound volume from a shelf at random, blew reflectively at the dust which lodged upon it and moved over to one of the windows. With a further sigh, she sank down in a swish of skirts upon the wooden windowseat and stared out at the roses in the terraced garden. The book slipped unnoticed from her fingers as she pondered once again on what the highwayman had said to her.

Could she believe that what he had told her of Kit was the simple truth? If only there was someone in whom she might safely confide! A serious discussion could never be held with either Aunt Hetta or with Cousin Clarissa and speaking to *Kit* on this point was not to be considered. There remained but William Drew and Gilchrist the coachman. Of these two, she knew that she would rather share her anxiety with Gilchrist, but it was just not *done* to burden even favoured servants with one's personal problems.

It was odd that she should shy away from the thought of asking William for help, she thought wryly. Aunt Hetta, at least, fully expected that she was to wed this very worthy manager of Kit's estate one day in the future. Antonia wrinkled up her nose in distaste. William Drew was a very proper man, but deadly dull. "Dreary," Clarissa had considered him, and for once

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Antonia was inclined to agree with her feather-brained cousin. But dreary or no, she would be obliged to marry *someone* eventually.

Her thoughts left William Drew all too speedily and she considered uneasily the highwayman's promise to contact her again. What lay at the root of his odd-sounding request? Would he truly hold his tongue about his supposed knowledge of Kit if Antonia complied with his wishes?

She stood up abruptly, her grey eyes fixed unseeingly on the varying hues of the rose-garden. It was evident that she had no choice but to trust the doubtful word of a self-confessed criminal.

* * *

Aunt Hetta joined the younger members of the family once again and it seemed that she had spent the time in her bed-chamber in planning out a return of hospitality for the Bowdens and their gentlemen guests. She made no further reference to the highwaymen and Antonia realised incredulously that her aunt had already dismissed that untoward occurrence from her butterfly mind.

"We shall ask them to dine, of course," said Henrietta Wade positively. "Now let me see what number we shall be at table! There are the four of us and, naturally, we must have dear Mr. Drew for Antonia—"

"Oh," said her niece with a lift of her brow, "I thought that I was to concern myself with Mr. Justin Garth. Am I not to seek to attract him? Shall I find myself seated between him and Mr. Drew, Aunt, for how else can I attempt to keep the Garths in the district?"

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As always, her aunt missed the gentle sarcasm in her voice and gave a doubtful frown.

"No—I do not think it would be quite the thing to put you between two unattached gentlemen, Antonia," she said, her blue eyes anxious. "Yet you *must* have Mr. Garth upon one side—and *do* see that you engage him in lively conversation, love! We must not let him leave with his cousin just yet. Clarissa must have her chance to become acquainted with Dominic Garth! Now, let me see. Ah—I have it! Dear Mr. Drew is almost a member of the family. He will not mind where he is seated! We shall put him between Christopher and myself. He will not think it odd."

Kit made an impolite sound which he hurriedly turned into a cough.

"Thank you very much, Aunt Hetta," he said bitterly. "You know quite well that he will put me off my food. He is a shade too perfect for me. He is supposed to manage the estate not live in my pocket!"

His aunt sighed.

"Do not be difficult, Christopher," she reproved. "Remember that we are doing this for Clarissa's sake. Do you not wish her to make an advantageous match, so that we may no longer be a burden upon you?"

Kit and Antonia exchanged wry smiles. Aunt Hetta could always turn a situation to her own advantage! She knew very well that she had only to refer to her own and her daughter's presence at Rawling House as a burden to have brother and sister alike smitten with pangs of conscience. She had been very good to them in the past, in her ineffectual way, and perhaps, after all, the least

they could do to repay her kindness was to help to secure Clarissa a wealthy marriage.

Talk of the proposed dinner party was resumed instantly, cutting short Henrietta Wade's plaintive remarks. Then, as soon as she was able to do so, Antonia escaped to the peaceful quiet of her own bed-chamber. She needed time to think, she pondered soberly. Although she had spent the last few nights in wakeful tossing upon her bed, she was no nearer in her mind to accepting what the highwayman, Captain Starr, had said to her. If it were true, then what unhappy light did it shed upon her dead mother?

Entering her bed-chamber, Antonia closed the door thankfully behind her. Her sigh of relief was short-lived, however, for the room had an occupant. Her elderly maid was standing beside the window. She turned her grey head expectantly when her mistress entered.

"Oh—Ellen!" said Antonia. "I had not thought you would be here just now."

Ellen Atkins hunched her thin shoulders in an offended manner.

"Sorry, I'm sure, Miss Tonia!" she muttered in anything but an apologetic tone. "I'll be leaving you then, seeing as how I'm not wanted."

The elderly woman moved slowly across to the door, then stood waiting to be asked to remain. She had had care of her mistress since Antonia was but a child and did not take kindly to exclusion from any happenings at Rawling House.

Antonia sighed and tried to smile.

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"I am sorry, Ellen-love," she said. "I have a headache coming on and I thought I would sit here quietly for a while."

She regretted the words the instant they were out, for Ellen came back eagerly into the room, her lined face at once smiling and anxious. For the next ten minutes or so, Antonia was obliged to lie down upon the couch whilst Ellen stroked her brow with tender hands.

"Thank you, Ellen," she said at last, ruefully aware of her own dislike of offending anyone needlessly. "I feel much better now, thanks to you. Leave me for a little while. I will go back downstairs soon, for my aunt is planning a dinner-party."

Ellen Atkins stepped back and sniffed.

"You mean, she's hoping *you'll* plan it for her, Miss Tonia," she said with scant respect for Henrietta Wade. "Small wonder you get headaches when the management of the whole house is on your shoulders. You're too good-natured, that's your trouble, miss. You should be running your own home by now. You're too easily put upon and that's a fact!"

Antonia smiled in real amusement now.

"Do not begin to feel sorry for me, Ellen-love!" she said. "I do very well as I am, you know! When Kit brings home a bride, then perhaps I too shall marry and leave here. But I am needed for the present and you cannot deny it."

"You're wasting your youth and none of 'em deserve it," persisted old Ellen. "Your poor Ma, rest her soul, would turn in her grave to see you so! Mr. Kit can get on without you and well you know it. 'Tis that aunt and cousin of yours that keep you here. *And* I don't

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mean to suggest you should rush off and wed that William Drew, either!" added Ellen darkly. "He's not good enough by half for my Miss Tonia!"

Antonia, laughing and protesting, managed at last to persuade Ellen to leave her. Then, her smile disappearing, she moved to sit beside the window. The view was a similar one to that afforded by the library below.

Dear old Ellen, she thought ruefully. The woman was fiercely and unswervingly loyal but no one could call her subservient. That forthright Yorkshirewoman would bow to nobody's better judgment. Clarissa would indeed talk of servants not knowing their place should she ever be privileged to hear Ellen in full spate!

For a brief moment Antonia paused to consider her own future and felt a sudden qualm of apprehension. Ellen was right, as usual!

"I am two and twenty," she murmured aloud. "If I am indeed to wed and not stay on as maiden aunt to Kit's children one day, then I'd best do something about mending matters!"

Her smooth brow creased in a frown. It was all very well for Ellen Atkins to dismiss William Drew as an unworthy suitor, but who else would be willing to wed a tall, twenty-two-year-old female with only passable looks, little fortune and a deplorably managing manner?

Antonia tried to smile and found that she could not. *Had* she allowed her good nature to be "put-upon", as Ellen worded it, for all of these years? Had she made a mistake in putting others before herself? Yet, wait—was she really so very unselfish? Had her motives been completely pure or did she only pander to her own

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inclination? Did she really *wish* to marry William Drew, or any other man for whom she could feel naught but cool friendship?

She drew rein on her thoughts with an effort. Her aim in seeking solitude had been to think out Captain Starr's revelations, not to fall into a swamp of self-pity in musing on her own uncertain future! She forced her mind back to that conversation beneath the trees with the dark-clad highwayman. He had been assured that she would obey him for Kit's sake and she knew that he was not incorrect in his assumption. Since their mother's death, she and Kit had become very close. The gap in their ages had always seemed to be far greater than it actually was, making her feel deeply responsible for her brother's happiness and well-being. Nothing must be allowed to mar Kit's future. The Rawling estate was not inconsiderable and belonged solely to Kit, although a group of rarely-seen trustees were to be more or less in charge of it until her brother attained his majority.

Captain Starr's threat to disclose certain supposed facts must not be allowed to take effect on Kit's young life. She, Antonia, would see to that, ignoring the personal cost and anxiety of the undertaking. After all, the highwayman's price for his silence could only be small in comparison with her brother's future happiness!

Had Captain Starr truly expected her to call his bluff—if bluff it had been—and renounce him to the law authorities? Was his further threat to expose Kit even in a gallows-speech in deadly earnest? What manner of man was this who had come so dramatically into

their lives? What had caused him to follow his dangerous lawless profession? He had seemed inordinately proud of his chosen name and his notoriety.

Antonia sighed once more as she considered what she had heard of the capture and execution of highway robbers. Hangings of convicted highwaymen occurred every year at Tyburn and nearer to home in York also. Even in this part of the world one might come across the gibbeted remains of a felon at a crossroads. She had heard horrid tales of highwaymen removing the decomposing corpses of their acquaintances from the gibbet in order to give them decent burial. Surely, hanging itself was sufficient punishment without adding the barbarism of gibbeting as a deterrent to others? Naturally enough it was an offence to remove a gibbeted corpse and official means were found to make removal impossible. She had even heard of corpses, tarred for preservation, which had been burned by the dead men's friends and had flamed like beacons to be seen for miles around.

Antonia shuddered violently. Despite her anger with Captain Starr for his disturbing of her peace, she could not bring herself to wish hanging and gibbeting upon him—or on his young companion either. How *could* the supposedly sensitive Clarissa have permitted her hand to be kissed by such a man, she thought next. Perhaps he had been young and handsome beneath his mask, but he was a *criminal*!

Life had been so smooth and uneventful up to that evening, she went on to think with bitter regret. They had all, in varying degrees, enjoyed the evening at the Bowdens and nothing had prepared them for interrup-

tion by highwaymen. Antonia rose to her feet wearily. Her thoughts were taking her in useless circles! She must go back downstairs to help Aunt Hetta in her plans for returning the Bowdens' hospitality. Perhaps her aunt would be satisfied if only they could have this Dominic Garth, with his prospect of a title, as Clarissa's suitor! I had best prepare myself to play my part in keeping the Garths here long enough for Clarissa to charm Dominic, Antonia told herself, her sense of humour reasserting itself.

The Bowdens' guests could not have impressed her deeply, she considered as she moved towards the door. She could not even remember the faces of these Garth cousins! Vaguely she recalled being presented briefly to them before being whisked off by Mrs. Bowden. As Antonia's main function at social gatherings was that of entertainer, she usually had little opportunity of conversing on these occasions. For the greater part of the evening she had been occupied in singing and playing, so it was no wonder that she had not really registered the looks of Justin and Dominic Garth—important as they might be to dear Clarissa's future! She recalled that Kit had condemned them for their elaborate wigs and waistcoats. Probably they were but dandified men of fashion. It was a pity that Clarissa could not marry the pair of them, she told herself. Perhaps then Aunt Hetta might be satisfied!

Antonia was still smiling faintly at this ridiculous notion when she arrived at the foot of the stairs. She halted upon the bottom stair, her hand lightly upon the elaborate baluster, as she surveyed with surprise the group of people standing in the entrance-hall. The

smile was still upon her lips as her grey eyes moved from one to another of the persons who turned their heads in her direction. Two men were of this number, both of them complete strangers to her. They appeared to be dark-haired, undeniably handsome and well above average height. This much her mind noted, as she waited for someone to speak. Oddly enough, the two strangers seemed to be directing smiles at her as if she were not unknown to them. A little at a loss, she waited still, and in the ensuing silence, found her gaze locking with that of the taller of the two dark strangers. She was the first to look away, an unusual fluttering sensation within her. She was glad when Cousin Clarissa broke the silence and moved out of the group towards her.

“Tonia, dear!” gushed her cousin. “Dear Caroline and Patricia have brought their guests to pay a morning call. Mrs. Bowden is here, too, with Mama in the drawing-room. Do come down and renew your acquaintance with our visitors!”

Antonia, her pre-formed notions of men of fashion decked in wigs and embroidered waistcoats vanishing abruptly, stepped slowly down the final stair. Reluctantly she came forward to greet the cousins, Dominic and Justin Garth. Surely these could not be the same men of whom she had taken so little heed at the Bowdens' dinner-party, she thought dazedly. They were so impressively tall, so extravagantly handsome and so far removed from her hazy recollection of them that she could not prevent a somewhat foolish smile from tugging at her lips.

The elder Mr. Garth received the full impact of her

smile and, naturally enough, assumed that it was for *his* benefit. He bowed in her direction, a smile upon his lips, but a tiny frown upon his brow, as if he were puzzled at being singled out for her favour. Reading this much into his expression, Antonia flushed and looked hastily away. She was glad when William Drew stepped forward and took her arm protectively in his. She found relief in being able to turn from Justin Garth's obvious scrutiny.

The entire party moved out through the doorway into the grounds, although Antonia protested half-heartedly that she, at least, was not dressed for walking. For some unexplained reason, her legs were unsteady beneath her and she clutched gratefully at Mr. Drew's arm, too much aware that Justin Garth's eyes were speculatively upon her, to realise William's possessive attitude before these strangers. It seemed that Mr. Garth had scarcely looked anywhere but at her since their eyes had first met when she was upon the stairs. Far from feeling flattered by his seeming interest, she felt merely ill-at-ease. The intentness of his regard could only stem from what he must have judged her extreme forwardness in smiling so boldly at him, she thought miserably. To steady herself, she chattered foolishly and inconsequentially to William Drew, who responded in all eagerness, congratulating himself upon her evident preference for his company.

CHAPTER THREE

"I DECLARE I would not have believed it of you, Tonia!" said Clarissa aggrievedly. "I am sure that you monopolised the company of the two gentlemen so shockingly, simply to vex me! Your dreary William noticed it too and he was quite put out of countenance!"

Clarissa's breast heaved dramatically as she glared at her cousin. To Antonia's annoyance she felt herself flushing at the unjust accusation. She was uncomfortably aware of her brother Kit's interested regard and knew that he would have noted her change of colour.

"It was not at all the way to go on, Antonia," scolded Aunt Hetta with gentle disapproval. "You should have managed things a little better! You are aware that we plan to have Dominic for Clarissa. I thought I made that plain enough, my dear!"

"*I* am aware of the plan," said Antonia, recovering her composure. "But does *he* know of it? Perhaps we should inform the Garths on the onset that they are not to concern themselves with anyone but Clarissa!"

"Oh—as to that, you may have *Justin* Garth, if you wish!" said Henrietta Wade generously. "After all, he is not heir to a title and he must be all of thirty years of age. It is your monopolisation of Dominic which is at fault."

Clarissa nodded her fair head angrily.

"You talked at so great a length of the house and dreary old *horses* that they could not, in all politeness, turn away from you!" she said bitterly. "You should have led off Justin and left his cousin to talk with *me*."

"Indeed, yes!" added Aunt Hetta gravely.

For a moment Antonia stared at them in disbelief, realising that they were in earnest in their ridiculous disapproval. She tried to laugh but to her horror found herself bursting into uncharacteristic tears. Kit's mouth dropped open with shock and the eyes of Henrietta Wade and her young daughter grew round with amazement. Antonia stared at them blindly through her tears, then rushed out of the drawing-room hastily.

By the time she reached her bed-chamber, the desire to weep had left her, but the very fact of her tears made her feel shaken and unsure. She was no longer a foolish young girl to indulge in childish weeping! Whatever must Clarissa and her aunt think of her? Poor Kit, she thought, attempting to smile. He had been quite astounded when she dashed past him and out of the drawing-room!

She sank down upon the couch, her skirts billowing out around her. It was a good thing that Ellen was not here, she thought as she attended to the tear stains with a clean kerchief. Her maid's questioning would have been merciless!

Antonia relived the walk in the garden which had occasioned Clarissa's wrath and Aunt Hetta's condemnation. Anyone would think that she had deliberately mismanaged the affair for her own ends!

The Bowden girls, Caroline and Patricia, had in all innocence led off William Drew with queries about a

strange wild-flower they had just added to their collection. They were indefatigable collectors and William had a countryman's wide knowledge of the lore of nature.

Left standing beneath the spreading boughs of an oak tree with the two Garth men and her cousin Clarissa, Antonia had felt somewhat at a loss. Not knowing that a walk was intended, or even that company had called, she had felt both dowdy and untidy in her gown of printed lilac cotton, with her hair arranged simply in its normal smooth style. In comparison, Clarissa's white silk dress and her elaborately piled fair hair had appeared quite festive.

The Garths should have realised that they were meant to make much of Clarissa! No one could have accused Antonia of setting herself to attract, for after making the mistake of appearing to smile at Justin Garth, she had withdrawn into a protective shell of silence. It was Clarissa's own fault that she had not led the conversation in channels more suitable to herself!

Despite Clarissa's evident eagerness for attention (or perhaps *because* of it, wondered Antonia doubtfully) Justin and Dominic Garth had spoken to *her* in preference to her angry cousin. In all politeness they had tossed an occasional word at Clarissa, as one might toss a bone to a fawning dog. Small wonder the younger girl was still seething with rage!

The talk had been commonplace enough, thought Antonia, habit making her feel guilty at causing distress to Clarissa and Aunt Hetta. They had spoken of Rawling House and its grounds, of the splendid show of roses and of horses—Clarissa's least favourite topic.

On consideration and with all due modesty, Antonia could not think why two exceedingly handsome men should have troubled to speak to her dowdy self, when Clarissa was so obviously prepared to charm them. Perhaps they had had bitter experience of the wiles of unmarried young females and had no wish to be hustled into matrimony. No doubt they had considered Antonia too old and too unattractive to be a danger to them!

She was a little surprised to have to acknowledge the fact that her own lack of attraction was hurtful on this occasion, although she had always before accepted that her looks paled into the shade beside any remotely pretty female. She allowed herself to dwell on the undoubted good looks of the Garths. If they were indeed as wealthy as Aunt Hetta hoped, it was a wonder that they were not wed already. Perhaps they had indeed had much practice at avoiding matrimony! She wondered if Clarissa had seen past Dominic Garth's possible inheritance of a title to his undeniable personal attributes. He—and his cousin also—had crisply curling dark hair, blue eyes of a deep hue, finely chiselled lips with a humorous set to them, and a firm, slightly cleft chin.

Somehow Antonia found it less disturbing to muse on the looks of the younger man, although they were indeed so very much alike. Dominic appeared to be little older than Antonia herself, whereas Justin, she thought, colouring faintly, had an air of assurance and maturity about him which made him far more dangerously attractive than his cousin. She knew that she would never forget her first sight of him, across the heads of lesser mortals in the Rawling hallway. He was

the tallest, broadest man she had ever encountered and he put her own not inconsiderable height into the shade, making her feel smaller and more feminine than she had ever done before.

She tried in vain to hush her racing thoughts. She was playing the foolish romantic in the exact way she had always condemned in others. How often had she laughed to hear Clarissa sighing over the good looks of some unattainable gentleman?

Antonia sighed. She must keep her imagination on a sane level! Justin Garth was unattainable indeed! Already he must have classed her as a pushing, forward female.

She gave a sudden gasp. Anyone would think that she was desirous of attracting the man in actual fact! She must remember that her task was merely to help, if possible, to keep the two Garths happily occupied in this part of the world!

Continuing her mental appraisal of their looks, she considered the short length of their crisply curling hair. Her brother Kit's eager approval of the fashion for adaptability of that length of hair. The fashion among gentlemen, in this year of 1776, was a close-cropped head, always hidden beneath a formal wig. Kit scorned the habitual wearing of wigs and up to now had worn his own hair long and tied at the nape. The Garths, he had enthused, seemed set to style a new fashion. Their hair was short enough to hide beneath a wig for evening wear, yet long enough to go uncovered by day. It was a capital idea, he said with eager approval.

Antonia switched her thoughts unwillingly to her recent bout of weeping. How could she go down and

face her relatives? What must they be thinking of her? She was at a loss to find explanation, even to herself, for those stormy tears. Perhaps they had been occasioned by her aunt's disapproval and Clarissa's bitterness coming so closely after her distressing meeting with Captain Starr. Thus she excused her own weakness, for surely her weeping could not have had any connection with those newcomers, Justin and Dominic Garth?

"I wish that Aunt Hetta had never voiced the suggestion that I should seek to interest Mr. Garth," she murmured aloud. "I am sure that I shall never be able to face him squarely, for I will always feel him to be aware of my dear aunt's foolish plan!"

Yet face him she must, when the proposed dinner-party took place. The Garths seemed likely to remain in the district for some considerable time so it was safe to assume that the invitation would be accepted, she thought gloomily.

Antonia rose to her feet resolutely. She was becoming as feather-witted as Clarissa! With a last glance in her mirror to check that the ^{glance} ~~tear~~ stains were gone, she squared her shoulders and prepared to join the rest of the household. Her head was aching sufficiently by now for her to feel justified in offering that as a reason for her uncharacteristic loss of control.

* * *

The dinner-party appeared to be a success. The dishes of beef, chicken, York ham and pastries were eaten with appetite by all but Antonia, who was feeling too tense and uncomfortable to relax and enjoy the evening. She attempted to eat a little of each course, not

wishing to draw unwelcome attention to herself. Henrietta Wade had a disconcerting habit of remarking upon a poor appetite, even before invited guests.

The huge dining-table had been set out to its full extent, for there were eleven in the party and Aunt Hetta believed in giving her guests ample elbow-room. With very little difficulty, Antonia had made a last-minute alteration to her aunt's proposed seating arrangements. Mrs. Wade need not scold her for not sitting beside Justin Garth, as he and his cousin seemed likely to stay with the Bowdens for some considerable time without added persuasion. The prospect of sitting beside *him*, knowing that she was expected to endeavour to charm him, was more than her tight-drawn nerves could stand at this moment. Had he been the

empty-headed man of fashion she had thought him to be, then no doubt she would have played her part to the hilt, revelling in the humour of the situation and exchanging wickedly teasing glances with Kit. But the situation was vastly different from all that she had anticipated. She owned that her encounter with Captain Starr had upset her normal serenity, yet surely her heart should not lurch so disturbingly whenever Justin Garth's enquiring blue gaze sought hers? Apart from his undoubted personal attraction, something about him troubled her. Despite the fact that she had only just met him, there was something not entirely unfamiliar about his general appearance. A startling, scarcely credible suspicion had taken root in her mind. Try as she would, she would not dismiss it as unfounded guesswork.

By seating herself at one end of the table and Mr.

Garth at the other end on the same side, she knew that she would not be obliged to meet his eyes at all during the meal. She had Kit upon her right, at the head in his position as host, and William Drew on her left. Between William and Justin Garth was Mrs. Bowden. Aunt Hetta occupied her usual place at the foot of the table. Beside her was Caroline Bowden. Then came Dominic Garth, Clarissa, Mr. Bowden and—facing Antonia—Patricia Bowden.

Antonia hoped that by placing Clarissa beside Dominic Garth she might make amends for her own supposed monopolisation of his company earlier. Yet, to Clarissa's obvious chagrin, the young man was dividing his remarks with scrupulous care between herself and Caroline Bowden.

Antonia peeled an apple thoughtfully, having refused to choose from an assortment of fruit tartlets. At least Clarissa could not declare that she had been given no chance of becoming acquainted with the younger Mr. Garth! No one could *force* him to devote himself entirely to Clarissa!

After several attempts to draw Antonia into conversation, William Drew had turned an offended shoulder upon her and was talking earnestly with his left-hand neighbour, Mrs. Bowden. The lady was welcome to *dreary* William for the evening, thought Antonia, suddenly rebelling against the idea that her name should ever have been paired with his.

Left to herself, for Kit could always be relied upon to concern himself single-mindedly with his food, Antonia found herself wishing almost desperately that the evening would come to an end. She knew that she could

not hope to escape her usual role of entertainer, but on this occasion she had not the slightest inclination to sing to the guests. Yet there would be no avoiding it, she thought, attempting to be philosophical.

The ladies retired at last to the drawing-room, in a swish of silken skirts. As Mrs. Wade preferred to deal with the coffee-cups herself, Antonia found that she was able once more to drift off into her own private thoughts. The Bowden girls were boring Clarissa almost to tears as they dwelled on the new flower William Drew had named for them the other day. They were dear girls, thought Antonia, feeling a prick of sympathy for Clarissa, but they were wont to fly off in transports of joy at the merest deviation from their humdrum lives. The New Flower held pride of place at the moment and Clarissa was seething openly as they obliged her to listen to a petal-by-petal description of it.

Mrs. Bowden, a woman of simple tastes, was pleasantly and fully occupied in watching Aunt Hetta at the coffee-cups. Thus Antonia found herself thinking once more of Captain Starr's threat to renew her acquaintanceship. Not a small part of her mind kept on returning to Justin Garth and to her own incredible idea about him. She marvelled that he should have made so great an impression upon her already. During the meal, she had been conscious of the pleasant even tone of his voice as he conversed with Mrs. Bowden and Aunt Hetta. No doubt he was well aware of the impact his good looks had upon susceptible females, thought Antonia uncomfortably. The way in which his blue eyes caught hers almost mockingly suggested that he had realised that even the grave self-sufficient Antonia

Rawling was not completely indifferent to him! He was altogether too sure of his own attraction, she told herself severely and unfairly. She must see to it that she returned his next look with coolness instead of a humiliating blush. After all, she was no young girl to be put out of countenance by the first truly handsome man she had ever met!

It was strange, thought Antonia next, that she was not prepared to be embarrassed in any way by his cousin Dominic, alike as they were. Out in the grounds the other day, she had found it easier to meet the eyes of the younger Garth and to reply to him without losing her composure. Possibly this was why Clarissa had declared that she had monopolised his company!

At least Clarissa could not complain of this evening's seating arrangements, even if Dominic had appeared to take a distressingly poor advantage of sitting beside her. With his personal attributes, his fortune and his expectation of a title, he would be well used to the ploys of match-making mamas! Although, to give Aunt Hetta her due, she had not put herself out to throw the young people together, apart from the actual arrangement of this dinner-party. Perhaps she was fondly convinced that young Mr. Garth would be so taken with Clarissa's charms that nothing was necessary but a first introduction!

Cousin Clarissa looked very pretty tonight in a new white gown of figured silk tissue with pink roses embroidered upon it. This pink was echoed in the elaborate petticoat which showed through the gown's open front. The elbow-length sleeves had fine lace frills which rested against Clarissa's dimpled white arms.

Her fair hair was piled high and she wore a bunch of false ringlets which rested against her shoulder.

Antonia's own gown was not new. It was of soft blue-grey silk and added depth to her calm grey eyes. Her hair was smoothly dressed as usual, but her maid Ellen had insisted that, for tonight, curling tendrils should escape on to her brow. Her mistress was too severe with her appearance, deplored the elderly maid. Laughingly Antonia had given in, although she had declared that she was not a young girl to be prettied up for guests. *I am not attempting to secure myself an Heir-to-a-Title*, she had told herself humorously.

Still pondering on gowns, Antonia looked across now at Patricia and Caroline Bowden. As usual, they had chosen to wear bright yellows and pinks which did little for their sallow complexions and dark hair. They were dear, good girls, Antonia told herself with a twinge of impatience, but they had not the slightest notion of how to make the best of themselves!

At this point, the drawing-room door opened and a bored-looking Kit ushered in Mr. Bowden and the Garth cousins. Her graceless brother seemed about to give vent to a vast yawn, thought Antonia, her lips twitching. No doubt he was wishing he could quit the party and go off down to the stables. Her smile froze upon her lips when she found that Justin Garth's eyes were upon her. He returned the smile as if he felt it had been intended solely for him! His seeming conceit left Antonia breathless with suppressed rage and she turned to greet William Drew, who was closing the doors behind the gentlemen. For the third time since her introduction to the Garths, she was far too effusive to

the bewildered Mr. Drew. He responded eagerly, forgetting her treatment of his conversation at the dinner table. Antonia faltered and her words became forced and stilted as she realised the interpretation William must be putting upon her singling him out for notice. It was all the fault of Justin Garth, she raged inwardly. The man was insufferable!

When she was begged to play and sing, she chose to perform upon the harp. William Drew rushed to secure her a stool of the correct height and succeeded in falling over his own feet in the attempt.

She watched him with half-affectionate disgust. He was thirty-seven years old and an able manager of the Rawling estate, but his eager clumsiness within doors was little short of nauseating. Without actually consulting Antonia, he had intimated to Aunt Hetta that he would not be against the idea of marrying her niece—one day in the distant future, of course. This odd, second-hand kind of wooing did nothing to endear him to Antonia, but she held her peace. Who knew that she would not, one day, be glad to wed this unexciting expert of wild-flowers, if only to escape the fate of feeling herself a burden to Kit? William, although a mere estate manager now, would be moderately wealthy in the future, when his stubbornly healthy old father at last decided to die. Antonia sighed to herself. In this day and age, far too much emphasis was put upon a person making a suitable marriage. How horrid if she had really wished to wed William and had been obliged to wait ghoulishly for his father to die!

She gave another sigh as she ran her fingers lightly and experimentally across the harp-strings. The great unwieldy instrument occupied a permanent corner in

the drawing-room, for Rawling House had no music-room. At first she played half-heartedly, her eyes firmly averted from her politely silent audience. Probably none of them really wished to listen, anyway!

Then, as always, the tune began to draw her away on its melody and she forgot her companions. Everything ceased to exist but the music she was creating. Antonia had a natural ear for music and had been a delight to her tutor from a very early age. Commencing another tune, her voice rose effortlessly above it as she sang away all the worries and anxieties of the past few days.

When she was finally silent, she found that the room was hushed and every eye was upon her. Even Clarissa was open-mouthed, although she knew that the expression did not become her. I really must have surpassed myself, thought Antonia dryly. The silence was broken at last by Aunt Hetta.

"That was very nice, Antonia. Thank you, my dear!" she said kindly and beamed around at the assembled company. "My niece has a very pretty voice, has she not?"

In the midst of applause and murmurs of agreement, Justin Garth rose to his feet abruptly. He moved towards the harp and ran his fingers across its strings in a ripple of sound. Antonia moved her own hands hastily, but he did not look at her.

"Her voice is far from pretty, if you will excuse a contradiction, ma'am," he said quietly, with a bow in Henrietta Wade's direction.

"Oh—did you not enjoy the song? *I* thought it was pretty," said Aunt Hetta doubtfully. "Perhaps I was wrong! I am not at all musical, you see, Mr. Garth."

In spite of herself, Antonia found that she was look-

ing at Mr. Garth in puzzlement. He might not approve of her singing, but must he make his disapproval so open? Then, to her amazement, she found that he had taken her hand in a firm clasp and was raising her to her feet.

"You have an enviable gift, Miss Rawling," he said, and there was no doubting his sincerity. "I will not have your voice called merely 'pretty'! Perhaps 'excellent' or 'fine', but never 'pretty'."

Antonia tried to recover her hand, murmuring that he did her too much honour. Her grey eyes were perplexed, for she had not expected such unstinting praise from this source. Feeling her fingers move with his, he clutched them all the tighter and she glanced up to see that a mocking glint had entered his blue eyes. Instead of releasing her, he bent his bewigged head and put his lips to her quivering hand.

"I salute your gift, ma'am," he murmured blandly.

Antonia fought inwardly to retain her composure, aware that nine pairs of interested eyes were upon her. Cheeks burning, she looked away from Justin Garth and managed to stammer an acknowledgement of his praise. She was glad when he left her side, but knew that he was watching her still. Although he had not seemed insincere, she had the oddest feeling that Mr. Garth was determined to stir her into awareness of him. As if I were not aware of him already, she pondered wryly.

The evening wore on. The Bowden girls sang obediently but tunelessly at their mother's behest, but Clarissa declined the invitation to perform. Her voice was small and she knew that she could not hope to compete with her cousin's undoubted success.

Later, they found themselves talking in groups. Aunt Hetta and Mrs. Bowden seated themselves comfortably together, while Mr. Bowden carried off both Kit and William Drew into a corner, no doubt eager for masculine conversation. After several minutes Patricia and Caroline joined their mother and her friend, oblivious to all broad hints that they should stay with the younger members of the party. They were unassuming, home-loving girls and it was evident to Antonia at least that they had no immediate desire to attract husbands and leave their dear Mama and Papa.

Clarissa, still jealous of her cousin's musical talents, did her best to prattle on beguilingly to the Garths, leaving Antonia out of the conversation. It seemed at first that she would succeed. Antonia stood upon the fringe of the group, trying to analyse once more the odd effect Justin Garth had upon her. She eyed him gravely as he smiled at Clarissa's wit, knowing that *she* could not be as much at ease with him. Why must her heart leap so foolishly and humiliatingly at a glance from his dark blue eyes, when she had known him but two minutes? Why, also, must the beginnings of suspicion that he might not be all he seemed cause her inward turmoil?

The dress of the Garth cousins was admittedly that of men of fashion tonight, but they wore their embroidered coats, satin waistcoats and silver-buckled breeches with an air which was anything but foppish. With their ruffled shirts and immaculately curled wigs, they appeared to Antonia's unpractised eye fitted to bow before King George himself. Clarissa's elaborate gown accorded so well with the formal dress of these two imposing figures that Antonia felt dowdy and in-

significant beside them. Always the tallest female in any group, she was surprised—and not unpleasantly so—to find herself dwarfed by these large Garth cousins.

She could not recall later exactly how the discussion had begun, but it seemed about to swell into a full-scale argument, she thought, abandoning her musing and giving her full attention to Clarissa and the gentlemen. For the past few minutes she had been aware, without paying full attention, that Clarissa was pouting and attempting to turn the subject. Dominic Garth, so like his cousin, yet with a boyish truculence which only served to emphasise his lack of maturity, was disputing with the unwilling Clarissa an obscure biblical reference.

Trying not to smile at her cousin's evident bewilderment, Antonia murmured that perhaps she might be able to provide an answer—provided the question could be repeated for her benefit.

"Miss Rawling! I vow you have not been listening to our worthy debate," drawled Justin Garth. His tone was light enough, yet his eyes seemed strangely watchful. He repeated the disputed point and then, before Antonia could declare herself unable to answer, both he and Dominic were demanding that a Bible should be brought.

"We must set these two to rights and restore order," said Justin, his eyes still upon Antonia, who wondered why such a point was being made of it all. It was clear to anyone that Clarissa did not wish to argue. Why must Mr. Garth speak of *order* being restored?

"There is a Bible in the library next door," said

Antonia, frowning and forgetting for the moment to be put off balance by the blue eyes of Justin Garth. "If you feel that it is necessary, then I can ring to have it brought in here."

She could not be sure on later reflection which of the Garth cousins somehow ensured that *she* was the one to go in search of the desired Bible. One or both of them in some way contrived that she should go alone into the next room. Of so much she was certain.

She slipped out, unnoticed by the rest of the party, into the hall and opened the library door. The air of the room struck chill upon her, for the hearth held no fire in the summer months. The library was dim although the long window curtains had not been drawn. Sufficient moonlight slanted in for her to make out the bookshelves and the other familiar furnishings.

A Bible was always to be found upon the small table beside one of the windows, so Antonia moved across the room in search of it, frowning a little, for she considered the checking of the obscure reference not only unnecessary but odd in the extreme. Who cared about the forgotten sayings of some minor prophet? It was at this point that she began to suspect that her presence in this room might have been arranged—yet to what purpose?

Even as she crossed the room, the curtains billowed inwards suddenly and a cool draught of evening air blew towards her. Antonia stepped backwards with an alarmed gasp then halted, her back against a chair.

The glass doors had opened and someone was entering the library!

She pressed a hand to her mouth to still a further gasp

as a dark-clad figure stepped past the curtains and into the room, his broad form shielding the moonlight's glow and casting an immense shadow upon her.

"*Captain Starr!*" she breathed, gripping at the chair to steady herself. "W-what are you doing here in the house?"

It was indeed the stockily built highwayman. He stood eyeing her sardonically, turning his head so that moonlight lit up his masked features. She could not repress a shudder and the man uttered a soft laugh.

"'Tis I and no ghost, Antonia Rawling!" he told her. "I did say that we should meet again. Come, girl, I'll not eat you! I have a request to make—as I promised. I know that you will not refuse me—if only for the sake of your brother."

Antonia drew in a deep breath, then whispered shakily:

"Have your say, sir. You know that I must obey—"

She broke off on a gasp, for Captain Starr had put a quick finger to his lips and was shaking his head warningly, his eyes gleaming through the slits in his mask.

"Someone is coming!" he hissed. "Come back here to this room at two o'clock when your guests have gone. We will speak then!"

He slipped out through the glass doors and closed them softly, surprisingly quiet upon his feet for a man of his bulk. No doubt he was well used to moving stealthily.

The library door opened, but Antonia was still staring as if entranced out into the moonlit rose-garden. She took no heed of the man who had entered the library until his voice sounded close behind her.

"We grow weary with waiting, Miss Rawling! You can scarcely mind the Scriptures well, if your Bible is so difficult to locate!"

Antonia spun round, her blue-grey skirts swishing about her.

"Oh—Mr. Garth!" she gasped. "I—oh! What d-did you say? You startled me!"

Justin Garth's eyes followed the direction in which she had been staring, then he turned to look at her levelly.

"What is it?" he demanded. "Something has distressed you, Miss Rawling." He took a step towards her and frowned down at her pale face. "Your eyes are wide enough to make me believe you have seen a ghost out there in the garden! We should have bidden a servant fetch the Bible as you suggested. It was thoughtless of us to allow you to leave the party on this errand." He frowned when she did not respond to him, and reached out to take in his one of her hands which was hanging limply by her side. "Come—shall we go back to the party?" he asked her gently, perturbed that she should seem so shocked without apparent reason.

Antonia moved at last.

"No!" she gasped and clutched involuntarily at his hand.

Justin Garth eyed her closely, his perplexity mounting. This little Miss Rawling of the angelic voice was gripping him as desperately as a drowning man might grasp at a branch! He must do something to dispel her intensity for it was obvious that she did not feel able to confide in him the reason for her shocked state.

"No, Miss Rawling?" he murmured lightly, quirk-

ing an eyebrow down at her. "Are we to stay here in the dark for ever then—you and I?"

Antonia blushed, dropped his hand as if it had become red hot, and recovered her senses in a hurry.

"Oh—forgive me!" she stammered. "See, here is the Bible. L-let us go back to the others!"

Her voice trembled and Justin Garth frowned anew as they moved out of the moonlight and crossed the darkened room. He had been half-sure that someone was lurking out there in the garden. Surely Miss Rawling would have told him if she had noticed a prowler through the window. Could it be that he had disturbed her in some kind of *assignation*? This scarcely fitted in with the picture she presented to him. She was so reserved and prim-seeming that it would amaze him to learn that her nature belied her appearance.

Antonia managed to keep up a show of outward calm until the guests finally made their farewells and departed. She knew that Justin Garth's blue eyes had been upon her in puzzled speculation for the remainder of the evening and she wished she had used anything but his proffered hand to steady herself in her moment of shock. It had been bad enough seeing Captain Starr enter her home so calmly, she told herself, without being interrupted by Mr. Garth! What must he think of her?

In the quiet of her bed-chamber, Antonia waited for two o'clock to chime down on the stableyard clock. Hands clenched tightly together, she paced up and down softly, hoping that she would not disturb old Ellen, who was asleep in the small room which adjoined hers. She had insisted that her maid should not

wait up to assist her to bed, declaring that she could deal with a few buttons and tapes without keeping Ellen from her beauty-sleep. The elderly woman had made a pretence of grumbling but had been glad enough of the opportunity of retiring early.

"I must not wake her," whispered Antonia to herself, forcing her feet to stay their pacing. "She would be scandalised out of her wits if she thought I planned to go below stairs again at this unearthly hour!"

While she waited for the time to pass, Antonia found her teeming thoughts returning to Justin Garth and his cousin. Was she stretching her imagination too far or *had* one of them contrived that she should go alone to the library and at that precise time? Mr. Garth had seemed concerned enough to find her trembling there in

the darkness. Surely *he* could not have planned her meeting with the highwayman? If the arrangement had been his, then why had he interrupted by entering the library in search of her? Was her strange suspicion that he might possibly have been Captain Starr's accomplice on the night of the hold-up, entirely without foundation?

The younger highwayman had been much the same height as these Garth cousins and she had noticed the distinctive cleft in his chin, so like theirs, beneath his concealing mask. *Would* a gentleman join forces with a common highwayman, and if so—*why*? Antonia bit her lip, perturbed, then tried to smile. Mr. Garth had certainly not had to feign amazement when she clutched so frantically at him! He might be aware of the effect of his looks and personality upon unattached females, yet surely he had not expected that *she* should hang upon

his hand and invite him to dally with her in a darkened room? She felt her cheeks grow hot. If Justin Garth were innocent of all connection with the highwayman and had *not* taken part in a plan to send her alone into the library, then he must be totally bewildered by her sudden preference for his company!

She waited impatiently for the appointed hour to arrive, her head aching as she tried to resolve her problems. If Justin Garth had no knowledge of Captain Starr, then what of his young cousin, Dominic?

CHAPTER FOUR

ANTONIA opened the door of the library cautiously. A minute or so ago she had heard the long-awaited double chime. Had Captain Starr arrived yet? She moved warily into the dark room.

"Is—is anyone there?" she whispered.

Silence greeted her, broken only by the measured ticking of a clock, but she thought that a shadow had moved outside one of the windows. With extreme reluctance, she went to peer out through the glass. Of course, Captain Starr could not be in the room! The servants would have secured all the doors and windows after the guests' departure.

Her heart lurched uncomfortably as she saw the expected masked face staring back at her through the window. How dark and sinister the man appeared! With a hand that shook, Antonia unlatched the glass door, wishing that she could find the courage to refuse to speak with this man. Yet—if he had not lied—his power was absolute. She must do nothing to offend him in case he should decide to carry out his threat and expose what he knew of Kit.

The door opened inwards with a mild creak of protest and Antonia stepped back to admit the unwelcome guest.

"You were wise to obey me, girl," murmured Captain Starr, his teeth showing whitely in a grin.

She stared back at him, helpless anger rising within her. If only she could slam the door in his face, ring for the servants and have him apprehended! Yet that would avail her nothing, for had he not promised to speak of Kit even upon the gallows-block? She could do nothing to ensure his silence, save by obeying him. Even a captured highwayman was allowed to make a dying speech. This man before her would stoop to blacken her brother's name as he waited for the hangman to adjust the rope about his neck—

"So you almost decided not to admit me, did you, Antonia Rawling?" said the man, reading her thoughts in that disconcerting manner of his. His grin widened, as if her inward rebellion was apparent to him. "I had thought you as spiritless as your mother. Perhaps after all you do not favour her so closely!"

Antonia gasped.

"Do not speak of my mother in that familiar fashion!" she said.

He eyed her with sudden impatience.

"We can scarcely leave *her* out of this matter," he said shortly.

Antonia drew in a sharp breath.

"I—I *hate* you," she breathed. She half turned to direct her gaze across the room at a portrait above the hearth. A finger of moonlight illuminated the painted faces upon it. "You dishonour my mother's name," she added in a tight whisper.

Captain Starr did not trouble to reply but he crossed the room to stare upwards at the portrait. Unwillingly

Antonia moved in his wake. The picture had been commissioned several months after her brother's birth. It showed Mrs. Rawling sitting with the infant Kit held in her arms. A wide-eyed childish Antonia stood close beside her mother's skirts, while the broad-shouldered figure of her father occupied a place in the background. Her mother had spoken many times of this portrait. Her husband had been so proud of his son and heir that he had sought for a suitable artist within weeks of the birth. His son! Antonia bit hard upon her lip and turned to look once more at her masked companion. Was it really possible that her own mother of fond remembrance could have betrayed her husband with a *highwayman*?

"Did he never guess?" she asked bleakly, nodding her head towards the portrait.

Captain Starr appeared startled for an instant, but instead of replying he muttered gruffly that he had not got all night to stand there talking. Antonia stood her ground.

"I *demand* that you answer me!" she said evenly. "There in the portrait are my dead parents. See the way in which my father's eyes turn so proudly to his heir! Tell me now, then have done—*did* he never guess that Kit was not his? Did he remain deceived to the end? *Did* he?"

Her voice had risen unsteadily. With an uneasy glance about him, the highwayman hissed:

"Keep your voice down, girl! Do you wish to bring the whole house about our ears? This all happened many years ago and I've not come to satisfy your curiosity, miss!" He shot her a sidelong look. "You've

all but admitted to believing I spoke the truth. Come, girl—hear me out. Do as I say and you'll have seen the last of me. You'll not need to fear I'll go back on my word. *That* holds good, though 'twill doubtless surprise you! Your brother's right to inherit will never be contested. Rely on that!"

Antonia thought quickly, then murmured:

"If you did decide to tell the world that Kit is *not* my father's son, then how do you know that *I* will not inherit and hand over the property to Kit?"

She held her breath, waiting for his answer. The highwayman gave a short laugh.

"You'll not trick me so easily!" he scoffed. "D'you think I've not gone deeply into this? I know—and so do you—that a female can never inherit this estate. Failing your brother, the next male heir would have to be sought out. Then you'd both be homeless! Think on that, girl!"

Antonia gave him a direct look.

"You are truly hateful," she said, unable to keep a quiver from her voice. "It is strange that you should know so much of my family, is it not?"

"Not so very strange when you consider my connection with your mother," he reminded her, his tone somehow less harsh, as if he condemned his former manner. "Come, Antonia—I would not stoop to threaten you if I could find another solution to my problem."

"What is this problem of yours?" she asked, suddenly impatient. "Why are you so positive that I can help, even if I profess myself willing?"

He moved away from the hearth and stared towards the glass doors.

"I have a daughter," he said quietly. "I do not like the way in which she has been obliged to live. I would have you bring her here to Rawling House."

He fell silent and Antonia drew in a hissing breath of shocked anger.

"Your daughter is your own responsibility," she said. "Cannot you and your wife care for her? Why should *I* wish to make the acquaintance of a highwayman's daughter?"

"I have no wife," retorted Captain Starr. "The girl's mother was a tavern-maid. She died a short time ago. Betsy has no one but me to turn to. I will not have her ill-used—"

"Betsy?" said Antonia, struck by his softened tone.

"Aye," he muttered gruffly. "She's a bonny little maid and is but fifteen years of age. I'll not have her grow up in a common ale-house, now that her Ma's gone."

"Oh," murmured Antonia doubtfully, all anger leaving her. Relief flowed through her. If she provided a home for this Betsy, then Kit would remain in ignorance of his parentage and his inheritance would be safe. The price for her brother's future happiness appeared to be a small one. Was this the whole of Captain Starr's demand? Perhaps more would be asked of her, once she had agreed to this first part?

"Do you wish me to make a lady of your Betsy?" asked Antonia dubiously. "Is that why you have approached me?"

Eagerly Captain Starr swung round to face her.

"You will do it, then?" he demanded. "I knew that I could rely upon you, for you are your mother's daughter, Antonia Rawling. I knew that from the start."

Antonia stiffened.

"We need not speak of my mother," she said, unwilling to picture her well-loved parent with this lawless man.

He nodded.

"I take your point, girl. As for making a lady out of Betsy—I'll have none of that! She is a simple country-girl but too innocent for tavern life. Make of her what you will, but promise me she will be housed, clothed and fed in a decent manner. That is all I ask for her." He looked at Antonia, his lips lifting at the corners beneath his mask. "Surely that does not aim too high for a highwayman's daughter?"

"I may take her into my employ? You will not object to that?" asked Antonia, determined to know exactly what was required of her. "And what of her future?"

He nodded impatiently.

"Put her in the kitchen or train her as a maid—'tis all one to me," he declared. "As for the future, let that take care of itself."

Antonia thought for a moment.

"Very well," she said at last. "I will do as you ask." She drew a deep breath. "How must I introduce her to the household? I cannot just produce her from nowhere and expect no curiosity about her background. The servants would not let matters rest until they had discovered the truth about your Betsy. If she is to come,

then it must be in a natural way which will not invite questions."

She marvelled at her own outward calm and her ability to view this odd situation so objectively. Perhaps later she would be angered by the weak way in which she had agreed to this man's terms. At present nothing mattered, save the fact that he went away and left her in peace.

The highwayman nodded.

"You are not without sense, Antonia Rawling," he approved. "There will be nothing to fear from servants' gossip. Betsy's introduction to your home has been well planned."

He knew from the very first that I would not defy him, thought Antonia somewhat wearily. Even as he held up the coach that night, he must have guessed that I would not refuse to house his daughter!

Captain Starr was regarding her, the expression upon his masked face unreadable.

"Betsy is to be a homeless waif running away from a cruel master who has no claim upon her," he said. "In a way, this is little but the truth! You will find her, take pity upon her when she tells her tale and offer her a place in your home. It will be as simple as that, Antonia! No one will question your charity, I am sure."

Antonia turned doubtful eyes towards him.

"Do you plan to have your daughter come to the door with her tale of woe?" she asked frowning. "How do you know that my servants will not turn her away before I can intervene?"

The highwayman gave a short laugh.

"Betsy is not to seek you out!" he told her. "You are to go out riding beyond the grounds. On skirting Cranworth woods you will hear her cry out. You must dismount and go to investigate. See that you are alone when she tells her tale, for I have little faith in her acting abilities."

Antonia shook her head decisively.

"I cannot ride alone," she said firmly. "I never do so! It would certainly invite comment."

"Ah, you must not ride alone," said Captain Starr smoothly. "It will be better to arrange a riding-party. The Bowden girls and their guests shall be invited. Kit and your cousin Clarissa will ride also."

"You know us all too well," said Antonia tartly, "yet perhaps not so well, after all, for nothing will induce *Clarissa* to set out riding!"

The highwayman's lip curled sardonically.

"Perhaps I know your cousin better than you suppose," he said. "She will not refuse to ride if Dominic Garth is to be in the party!"

Antonia shivered. This strange man's unfailing knowledge of them was disquieting. How did he come to know so much? Clarissa's interest in the younger Mr. Garth was a very recent thing. Had Captain Starr gone to such lengths merely to secure his daughter a gentler home? What kind of man would do this? It was obvious that he was both thorough and determined, yet surely there must be something of kindness too, if he could deal so fairly with his Betsy?

"Must *I* approach the Bowdens and their guests with the suggestion of an arranged ride?" murmured Antonia reluctantly. She had no wish to beg Justin Garth's

company in a forward and apparently reasonless fashion. She half expected Captain Starr to tell her brusquely that arranging the ride was her own affair. Instead, he offered her an encouraging smile.

"Kit will see to it," he said confidently. "Make a tentative suggestion to your brother. I am sure that he will be eager to arrange everything."

There was nothing threatening about the man's manner, but Antonia stared at him and shivered once more.

"You know us and you know our friends too," she whispered. "I feel that the Garth cousins also are not strangers to you. Do you truly seek naught but a home for your Betsy? I fear you have a wider plan in mind." She recalled her earlier impression that one, at least, of the Garths had arranged her meeting with this man. "Do you know the Garth cousins well?" she added in a louder tone.

"I know them as I know you, Antonia Rawling," said the highwayman easily. Her question did not appear to have caused him to falter. "I must leave you now," he continued, but his eyes had left her and were fixed upon the portrait above the hearth. "A handsome, happy family group, would you not say?" he demanded, his voice suddenly harsh.

"Please go," whispered Antonia. "You cannot harm my happy memories of my parents, so do not tire yourself in the effort."

"Memories!" he scoffed, his masked face turning back to her. "Never rely on memories, girl! Take what is offered and be content, but never think to dwell upon the dead past."

She stared back at him, disturbed by his intensity.

"I think you must be a most unusual highwayman," she was driven to remark. "You are a fountain of advice and enigmatic sayings, yet *you* cannot have gained any profit from your own wisdom."

"Wisdom?" he said mockingly. "What is wisdom? There is no wise man left upon this earth!" He moved swiftly to the glass doors, opened them and stepped outside. Cool night air blew gently into the room. "The riding-party must take place in three days' time, in the morning. There must be no mistake! Now lock up the doors after me, child," he added. "Farewell for the present!"

Antonia found that she was alone. With trembling hands she obeyed Captain Starr and secured the doors. Resting her brow for an instant against the cold thick glass, she pondered uncertainly on the conversation which had just taken place. An unusual highwayman indeed! Who would expect a person of *that* profession to bid her lock the doors against intruders? It was evident that he had no desire to rob her family.

She drew in a sharp breath. In a few short words, Captain Starr *had* robbed her. He had stolen away her peace of mind and left her fearful for her brother's future.

"I'd as lief he'd had designs upon our purses that night," she murmured as she stared wearily out at the dark rose-garden. "Such a theft could have been borne with a show of righteous indignation, but for the theft of Kit's good name there can be no recompense."

She toyed with the idea of confiding in Kit for, after all, he was not a child. But Kit, for all his nineteen years, seemed to her the small brother of childhood.

Could she bring herself to tell him that their mother had borne a child to a highwayman and that he was that child? She was convinced that Kit would refuse pointblank to take up his inheritance. His principles were too much of the rigid schoolboy code for him to hear this shocking news and then forget it. Yet he was no longer a schoolboy, she argued with herself. Perhaps she should have more trust in his good sense.

Antonia sighed. It was foolish to tell herself that Kit would be willing to stay at Rawling House if he felt that he had no right to do so.

"I must say nothing," she murmured. "This affects not only Kit but my aunt and Clarissa also. It is *my* home, too! I will not speak to my brother. I will not make us all homeless!"

Softly and with all due caution, she retraced her steps to the safety of her own bed-chamber. She undressed clumsily in the darkness, not daring to light a candle in case she should wake Ellen. When at last she lay, wide-eyed and wakeful, upon her bed, she forced herself to forget all else but the immediate problem of arranging the riding-party as desired by Captain Starr. It was true that she and Kit had ridden before with Caroline and Patricia Bowden. Perhaps, after all, it would not be so very difficult to plan.

She wished fruitlessly that Justin and Dominic Garth need not be asked to ride. Why had she clung so fervently to Justin's hand in the library this evening? He would take the invitation to ride as a further sign that she could not do without his company! If only Aunt Hetta had not spoken those foolish words of Antonia's endeavouring to attract Justin Garth! If only she could

have met him in other circumstances! Poor Antonia knew that her every meeting with this man would be coloured by her aunt's comfortable assurance that her niece was doing as she had been bidden!

"If I smile and speak to him, then she and Clarissa will feel that I am doing my best to charm him," she muttered, tossing uncomfortably upon her pillows. "Yet if I am cool and try to ignore him, he will wonder at my attitude!"

She thumped at the offending pillows, but had reached no solution to the problems besetting her before sleep at last claimed her.

CHAPTER FIVE

"A FAIR morning for a ride, Miss Rawling," observed Justin Garth, edging his night-black mount up to Antonia's own brown horse.

"Yes, indeed, sir," she murmured, outwardly composed. "Yet you do not see our countryside at its very best just now. Summer is well enough, I suppose, but the greenery is too lush for my taste. I prefer the gentler season of springtime."

The length of her reply to his civil remark surprised Antonia herself, while Justin Garth raised a dark brow in her direction. He had not expected more than a polite word of agreement from her.

"Something must surely be said in favour of every season," he said, hoping to encourage further conversation. He noticed that she blinked and turned her head in a startled fashion as if she had forgotten his presence already. "I know your Yorkshire countryside in all its many moods," he persevered, causing his horse to shorten its spirited pace to suit her own. "I am no stranger to this part of the world, although these immediate surroundings are new to me." He turned easily in the saddle and gestured towards a group of trees. "What is the name of this place, Miss Rawling?"

Unwillingly Antonia gave him her attention, shivering involuntarily when she realised the direction of his pointing finger.

"That is—is Cranworth Wood," she whispered.

"Has it a horrid history?" he asked teasingly, struck by her manner.

Antonia stared at him, momentarily bewildered.

"A horrid history?" she murmured.

Justin Garth smiled, but her expression puzzled him.

"I merely wondered why you should shudder," he said. "Do I take it that the wood holds nothing to disturb you?"

Antonia's hands clenched at the reins of her horse, realising that her companion must have noticed something odd in her this morning. The thought crossed her mind that if Mr. Garth were in league with Captain Starr, a thing she could not bring herself to accept as fact, then he would know already that the wood held Betsy, the highwayman's daughter. She shook her head, muttering that she was not at all disturbed.

Justin Garth eyed her, a frown upon his forehead. Something was troubling Antonia Rawling but he did not know her well enough to guess at a cause for her anxiety. Her attitude towards himself was both odd and inconsistent, yet he did not think her worry could have any possible connection with him. Could this uneasiness be her normal everyday nature? He doubted this strongly, recalling vividly her musical performance of several days past. On that occasion she had been confident and assured—at least until *he* had approached her, he remembered wryly.

Antonia's eyes were still upon the trees of Cranworth Wood and she missed the conjecture upon Mr. Garth's handsome features. As Captain Starr had surmised, the riding-party had been arranged naturally and without

surprised comment. She had scarcely broached the idea to her brother before he had adopted the notion as his own. No one, not even Kit himself, would now suggest that the ride had been *her* scheme. Amazingly enough, Clarissa, too, had been eager to come. Captain Starr had even judged her cousin correctly.

The lanes and grasslands surrounding the Rawling estate were flat enough for riding to be a leisurely pastime, even for a rider of Clarissa's ability, although the hills which ringed them in were high and craggy—a forbidding sight in the depths of winter. The party had sorted itself into three groups. Antonia, in her eagerness to arrive ahead of the others at Cranworth Wood, had ridden on in front, only to be followed by Justin Garth. Kit and the Bowden sisters rode together, while Clarissa and Dominic Garth brought up the rear. Fortunately William Drew was occupied with estate work and Kit had bidden the grooms stay at home. Antonia was tense enough at the prospect of feigning surprise when she discovered Captain Starr's Betsy without having to do so before a crowd. She wished that Mr. Garth would not watch her so closely. It would need better acting ability than hers to deceive him that this meeting was of the merest chance. Already he suspected that something was amiss—unless he was indeed in the highwayman's confidence and was taking an unkind delight in making the meeting with Betsy more difficult.

As they drew nearer to the trees, Antonia realised with a prick of dismay that the entire party had caught up with the leaders. Clarissa was attractively flushed with her unusual exertion and she appeared to have

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established an easy acquaintanceship with the younger Mr. Garth. Aunt Hetta would be pleased, thought Antonia wryly. Clarissa's mount was an elderly brown pony, more fitted for a child, yet even so her cousin was clutching rather breathlessly at the reins. She had always had a fear of riding. It spoke volumes for her desire to attract Dominic Garth that she had accompanied them today.

Caroline and Patricia Bowden rode well if in an unspectacular manner, and Kit was behaving admirably this morning, never once allowing his horse its head as he doubtless wished he might do.

Antonia suddenly recalled with shattering nostalgia the early morning rides she had enjoyed with her brother, until her mother had constrained her to be more ladylike. Her freedom had been abruptly curtailed when she reached her sixteenth birthday. The grooms had hidden away the saddle upon which she had ridden astride like a boy. Instead, she had found an elegant new side-saddle in its place. Never since that day had she ridden in anything but a formal manner, wearing a ladylike habit and with her hair neatly bound. She had loved her mother too well to remonstrate and cause an undignified scene. If Mama wished her daughter to grow up and become a lady, then that was the end of the matter. Antonia had never, knowingly, caused her mother even a minute of distress. It was not in her nature to hurt others.

Suddenly she gave a sigh, then wished that she had refrained from doing so. Justin and Dominic Garth and her cousin Clarissa, who were nearest to her, all turned their heads in her direction, their eyes enquiring. On a

sudden impulse Antonia prodded her horse into action and it responded gallantly by galloping off at a high speed into Cranworth Wood.

She had no particular plan in mind, only a desire to "discover" the highwayman's daughter and put an end to this play-acting game. Yet as she thundered towards the trees she began to have doubts as to the wisdom of her hasty move. The branches were uncomfortably low. Belatedly Antonia feared for the safety of her horse and attempted to slow its headlong rush. Twigs and leaves whipped at her cheeks, then suddenly her head struck a branch and she was swept from the saddle to land heavily upon the ground.

She had a hasty impression of a dark-haired child bending over her, then blackness enveloped her. When she recovered full consciousness she was vaguely surprised to hear the voice of old Ellen twittering in her ear. A pair of strong arms were holding her and Antonia blinked as she registered this fact, forgetting her maid. Gently she was lowered on to her own bed. For a brief instant she stared up bemusedly into a handsome masculine face which appeared to be very close to hers. Eyes of a dark troubled blue were regarding her, their expression one of anxiety. Antonia opened her lips to speak, but her eyes had closed once more before she could utter a word.

* * *

"Oh—so you are awake at last, Miss Tonia-love," came Ellen's familiar voice. The maid continued in a grumbling tone: "You're lucky not to be in a worse state than this and that's a fact!"

Antonia attempted to sit up in bed, then fell back upon the pillows with a groan.

"My head!" she moaned. "Ellen, bring me a mirror!"

Her maid tutted grimly as she brought a hand mirror to her mistress.

"T'branch hit you right smack on t'forehead," she said with gloomy relish. "You're a real sight, Miss Tonia."

Antonia gasped as she observed an angry weal across her brow.

"Lucky not to have broken your neck," retorted Ellen with a regrettable lack of sympathy. "You've ridden since you were a babe, so you should've had more sense than to ride under trees!"

Memory flooded back and Antonia remembered striking her head then falling heavily beneath the trees.

"My horse—is he harmed?" she murmured anxiously.

"Not at all," said Ellen, "though I'd say t'brute deserves a beating."

"Oh, no!" said Antonia. "He obeyed me beautifully!"

Ellen stared at her mistress, her eyes bright with suspicion.

"Tell me, Ellen," said Antonia slowly, "was there a young girl in the wood? I—I seem to remember—"

Ellen snorted.

"Aye, she's down in t'kitchen still. Reckon 'twas her fault you were thrown. She'd no right to be in t'wood. She must have startled your horse. They tried to make her go, but she insisted on staying till you're

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well enough to talk. Reckon she's scared to leave till she knows if you're going to be all right, Miss Tonia."

Antonia eased herself up cautiously, possessed by a feeling of relief. Betsy had almost been sent away! Thank goodness the girl had refused to leave!

"Go and bring her up here to me, Ellen," said Antonia firmly. "My accident was certainly not her fault. I would like to reassure her. You must leave us to talk alone, Ellen. She may be too shy to speak freely before both of us."

After several grumbling remarks, old Ellen left the room, her back stiff with disapproval. Antonia lay back against her pillows. Captain Starr's demand had been met, after all! His daughter was here in Rawling House, exactly as he had wished. Antonia grimaced. The meeting had been achieved at no little cost to herself, but for all that her pain was overshadowed by relief. The highwayman had been obeyed. Kit's future was safe! She had certainly not planned to allow her horse to unseat her but this accident appeared to have been providential! Being deemed the cause of it, it would have seemed natural enough for Betsy to plead to be taken back to the house to see that Antonia would recover. The riding-party must have brought the child here.

As she waited for the girl to enter, Antonia found herself recalling being carried into her room after her fall. Someone had brought her here and put her down upon the bed. Surely it had not been Justin Garth? Yet his had been the face she had last seen before succumbing for the second time to unconsciousness—

The door of the bed-chamber opened and a slim,

childish figure entered. The girl stood at the foot of the bed, eyes downcast, hands twisting in the skirt of her grey stuff gown. For a moment Antonia regarded her in silence, feeling a fleeting surge of anger that the highwayman should have put Betsy and herself into this odd position.

"Betsy?" she asked at last. "Close the door properly, please, then come and stand beside me. We must talk."

Without looking up the girl nodded and obeyed. Moving back to the bedside, she raised her eyes at last to look at Antonia. They were wide grey eyes and appeared to be filled with distress. Indeed, the child seemed to be upon the point of tears. She was small for her age and was extremely pretty. Her cheeks were smooth and pink with the bloom of youth and her long dark eyelashes were as black as the uncontrolled tangle of curling hair which fell almost to her waist. The girl reminded Antonia strongly of a young untamed wild creature.

"'Twasn't really my fault you fell, my lady," she stammered. "I thought you knew I'd be there. I—I'm sorry if I startled your horse." Her voice was surprisingly soft, unlike the rough accents of the countryfolk. She waited for a reply, her lip trembling.

Antonia relaxed. Whatever Captain Starr might be, he had not lied about his daughter. She was nothing more than a guileless child.

"The fall was no one's fault but my own, Betsy," said Antonia, quietly. "Come closer! Let me look at you, child."

Betsy flushed beneath the scrutiny of Antonia's cool gaze.

"I'll go away if you want me to, my lady," she offered suddenly. 'Twas *his* idea, not mine. I can go back to the tavern if you don't want me here."

Antonia shook her head hastily.

"No, that would not do at all, Betsy!" she said. "Your father wishes you to stay here in my home."

The girl gulped and gasped: "I wish you'd not fallen, my lady. It makes the whole thing shocking!"

Antonia smiled slowly. This child should not present any great problem, after all.

"If you are to live here, Betsy," she said gently, "what would you like to do?"

The girl stared, her eyes brimming with unshed tears.

"He—my father said you'd probably let me help in the kitchen," she murmured. She spread out hands which were roughened with toil. "I'm not afraid of work, my lady."

Antonia spoke on impulse.

"Would you like to learn the duties of a maid?" she said. "You may begin by assisting Ellen."

Betsy's eyes widened.

"*She* wouldn't like that," she said with a grimace towards the door behind which Ellen was doubtless standing.

Antonia smiled reassuringly.

"Ellen will be grateful for a little help," she said. "Have you talked to her or to any of the servants about your supposed plight?" she continued practically.

"I—I said what my father told me," whispered Betsy. "I told them I'd run away because my mother had died and I didn't want to work for a cruel master. It's more or less the truth, my lady."

Antonia nodded.

"Very well, Betsy! You have run away and I have offered you a home and employment. That is all anyone needs to know. Come, we will call Ellen in and explain matters to her. You must not fear her, Betsy, for she has the kindest heart in Yorkshire!"

"Thank you, my lady!" stammered the girl.

Antonia smiled.

"You must call me Miss Rawling," she said. "I am not a great lady, you know!"

When the news that she was to instruct Betsy in her new duties was broken to Ellen, she did not appear to take this as an insult against her own capabilities, as Antonia had thought she might. The elderly woman would never fear that her mistress would one day replace her for a younger maid. Ellen knew that her place at Rawling House was a safe one. Perhaps if Betsy proved suitable, thought Antonia, Ellen might be glad, later on, to relinquish her duties altogether.

However, Ellen did mutter at great length on the inadvisability of employing young persons found lurking in woods without written characters from their last place of employ.

"Mark my words, Miss Tonia," added Ellen. "She's a pretty enough little thing, but happen you'll regret taking her in for all that!"

Antonia refused to listen to these dire warnings. Betsy was here to stay—she *had* to stay, for she was the price of Captain Starr's continuing silence about Kit's parentage. His demands had been met! Perhaps now, life would revert to its normal calm pattern.

* * *

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Ellen had no difficulty in persuading her mistress to keep to her bed for several days. Antonia was bruised in more places than she cared to count and she was glad to lie back meekly and be treated as an invalid. It was a new experience for her and not an unpleasant one. Aunt Hetta, Clarissa and even Kit made fleeting visits to her bed-chamber, keeping their voices muted as if she were at death's door, she thought with amusement. But all of them had a strong dislike of sick-rooms and Antonia knew that she could reply upon being left more or less in peace until she chose to rise and rejoin the household.

The grateful Betsy, garbed more attractively now in a dress of blue cotton, flitted in and out of the room from time to time, but Antonia did not choose to exchange more than a few words of casual conversation with her new little maid. Although the child was harmless enough, she was a constant link and reminder to Antonia of Captain Starr and his relationship with Kit.

Old Ellen seemed to take a perverse delight in having her mistress in a position where she was obliged to lie and listen. Only by feigning sleep could Antonia hope to escape all sounds of her well-meaning maid. Ellen's repeated references to her new plan for her mistress's future would soon have her up from her bed, thought Antonia ruefully. The elderly woman was determined to find her a suitable husband. There was nothing new in this—only in the choice of partner.

"I always did say that Mr. Drew wasn't good enough for you," said Ellen for what seemed to be the hundredth time. "Fancy sending you in a bunch of roses from your own garden," she went on. "It's just like the man!"

Antonia did not even smile, as she had done when Ellen first made this disparaging comment. She had heard it so many times already and steeled herself to listen to what must follow.

"Now, Mr. *Garth*," went on Ellen, her faded eyes dreamy. "He's a proper man, that one! Carried you up here, after t'fall, as if you were a baby, that he did! *And* he's been over every day to see if you're improving. He's interested and that's a fact, Miss Tonia. Mark my words—he's *interested!*"

Antonia's cheeks burned and she turned to hide her face in the pillow, closing her eyes firmly and willing Ellen to go away and leave her to her thoughts. Yet when the maid had gone, she found her eyes straying, not to William's despised roses, thrust inartistically by Ellen into a jug, but to the neat printed card which bore Justin Garth's name. Without reaching out a hand to turn it over, Antonia knew that scrawled upon the reverse side in a thick, flowing hand was the message: "Speedy recovery. J.G."

Perhaps Mr. Garth was interested, as Ellen put it, but interested in *what*? Did his interest lie with Captain Starr and his devious plans and not with Antonia herself?

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMER was followed by early autumn and the trees in the grounds of Rawling House began to take on seasonal hues of russet, orange and gold.

The visit of the Garth cousins at the Bowdens' home appeared to have been extended indefinitely, for it was September now and, as yet, they had shown no sign of wishing to depart.

Henrietta Wade and her daughter were well content with this arrangement, for Clarissa's friendship with Dominic Garth seemed to be progressing upon the intended path.

Antonia, who was more perceptive than her feather-headed cousin, found the younger Mr. Garth something of a puzzle. On the surface of things he was enjoying his stay in the country, but there was an air of restrained impatience about him. Antonia had a feeling that he was doing not as he wished but as he must. Yet who would constrain him to keep to the wilds of Yorkshire against his will—and for what purpose? The notion would have been dismissed as ridiculous had not Antonia observed the manner in which Justin Garth was wont to regard his cousin. Sometimes she saw in Justin's blue eyes an expression of wary watchfulness, as if he were not quite sure of what might be Dominic's next move.

Yet the younger Mr. Garth appeared to do nothing to

merit such close scrutiny. He—together with his cousin and the Bowden sisters—came over to Rawling House with a frequency which pleased the flattered and eager Clarissa.

The young people rode, walked and conversed at great length on matters of little importance. Antonia, although often a member of the party herself, marvelled that so much time could be spent in idleness by so many people. *She* had much to occupy her, for although Aunt Hetta fancied that hers was the guiding hand upon household affairs, more often than not it was Antonia herself who was obliged to make both minor and major decisions.

Kit seemed glad enough of the Garths' companionship, but much of his time was spent in riding about the estate and to the outlying farms with William Drew. Her brother took his duties too seriously to consider neglecting them for mere pleasure, thought Antonia. She frowned a little when she considered the apparent aimlessness of the Garths. Dominic's tongue was rarely still, yet he revealed very little—whether by chance or intention—of his background and home life. Justin, too, did not choose to enlighten anyone with these details. Even the heedless Clarissa would not forget her manners sufficiently to question the cousins at any length. Antonia supposed that Mr. and Mrs. Bowden must know all that was necessary about their guests, but Aunt Hetta, to her ill-concealed chagrin, had not yet learned anything more of the man she hoped might wed her daughter. He was heir to a title and a fortune—that was enough, she declared. Yet Antonia knew that her aunt was avid for details of Dominic's home and parentage.

That the younger Mr. Garth should spend the summer and early autumn in idleness did not particularly concern Antonia, but aimlessness and lazy amiability in Justin Garth both displeased and disappointed her, in a way which was quite out of proportion with the progress of their acquaintanceship. Apart from the leisurely pursuits of riding and walking, his sole occupation appeared to be in keeping a steady eye upon his cousin's blamelessly innocent life.

Justin Garth was not an easy man to know, thought Antonia then. True, he would speak to *her* of less trivial matters than the general line of conversation. They had talked of music, of horses, of London and King George (—Mr. Garth had seen both). Yet even as they talked, Antonia felt that his attention was not completely upon her. For this reason she began to make excuses why she could not always join in a riding-party or a suggested walk. Mr. Garth must have accepted her absence without question, for never once had he left the party and attempted to persuade her to join in the activity. His seeming indifference both irritated her and injured her pride—which was altogether illogical, she admitted, for *she* had decided to avoid *him*! Why must she be put out by his failure to seek her company?

The girl Betsy was learning her new duties with a painstaking thoroughness which did not please Antonia as much as it should. The dark-haired child was a constant reminder of her highwayman father. If only she would perform her tasks in silence and then be gone, thought Antonia, ashamed of her own churlishness. Why must the girl await a word of praise with such humble eagerness?

Antonia gave a sudden frown. Perhaps "humble"

did not describe Betsy very well, after all. Sometimes there was a watchfulness about the girl which almost equalled that of Justin Garth. Antonia shrugged, annoyed with her own unease.

Why must anxiety continue to prey upon her mind? She had obeyed Captain Starr by giving his daughter a home. The weeks had gone by without word or sight of him. There was no reason to worry that he might reappear with further demands which might prove more difficult to satisfy.

All too easily Antonia's thoughts left Betsy and returned to their consideration of Justin Garth. During the time of her indisposition following the riding accident, he had been a constant enquirer after her progress to good health. Yet once she was returned to society, he appeared too preoccupied to accord her more than general civility. She accepted somewhat wryly the fact that his preoccupation with matters of which she had no knowledge piqued her. From time to time she stopped to wonder if her earlier surmise had been correct—if he (or his cousin) had in fact some close connection with the highwayman, Captain Starr. Could it be that the man who had declared himself the father of Kit, now was causing Mr. Garth anxiety?

Antonia bit her lip and reined in her thoughts with an effort. Yet another riding-party had been arranged for this afternoon. Kit and William Drew were to ride also. Their destination was to be Jewitt's farm. Perhaps Kit and William were to combine business with pleasure? Antonia had been half decided to accompany them today. Jewitt's farm had drawn herself and Kit like some magnetic force when they rode together in those

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far-off days of childhood. Mrs. Jewitt had always beamed in welcome as she prepared refreshment for her youthful guests, while her husband waited with barely suppressed impatience, eager to lead them round the farmyard to view a new-born calf or foal.

Antonia sighed. Perhaps Justin and Dominic Garth would have introduction to Mrs. Jewitt's buttered scones and well-matured fruit preserve this afternoon?

With an exclamation she rose from the library window-seat where she had been sitting. She would *not* go riding today! In her present dissatisfied mood, she was fit for no company but her own. The thought of Mrs. Jewitt's preserves had given her an idea.

"I will go berry-picking!" she declared aloud. "The brambles should be laden with fruit. It would be a pity to let it all go to waste!"

Thus decided, she smiled to herself and left the library, the lightness of her step matching her new light-hearted manner.

* * *

Cranworth Wood appeared more inviting today to Antonia than it had done on the day of her accident. The sun shone down benignly upon the autumnal tints of the trees which had hidden the waiting Betsy that day. Antonia frowned. She must not begin to think of Betsy and her highwayman father or the beauty of her solitary walk would be quite spoiled.

She had waited patiently until the riding-party had set out, bearing old Ellen's disapproval with her customary fortitude. Ellen knew without being told that her young mistress was avoiding rather than seeking the company of Mr. Garth, and did not like to consider that

her matchmaking plans might be of no avail. Once the party had left, Antonia donned an old stuff gown of a faded russet hue.

"And where might you be going, Miss Tonia?" Ellen had demanded unsmilingly. "'Twould seem you're set on making t'worst of your looks. That gown's fit for naught but cutting down for a work-dress for young Betsy, and well you know it!" Her tone had altered and grown persuasive. "Will you not change your mind, Miss Tonia, and get into your riding-habit? If you hurry you'll soon catch up wi' t'gentlemen and t'others. Reckon Mr. Garth'd be right glad to see you," she had ended in a wheedling voice.

Antonia had smiled at her irate maid, but had been unable to prevent the colour rising in her cheeks at the mention of Justin Garth.

"I am going berry-picking, Ellen-love," she explained. "This gown will suit me well enough today. You may give it to Betsy later—unless I ruin it with blackberry juice."

"Berry-picking!" sniffed Ellen. "'Tis no proper occupation for a lady. All t'same—I'd wager Mr. Garth would have helped you pick 'em—if you'd asked him."

At this Antonia had been able to laugh with real amusement. As she had been speaking she had been descending the main stairs into the hall, Ellen in her wake.

"You *cannot* imagine that Mr. Garth would wish to soil his hands on berry-juice, Ellen?" she said merrily. "That is a sight we shall never see!"

Finally she had escaped, although Ellen's grumbling

voice had followed her out through the open door. She had made her way to a shed in the kitchen-garden where she had secured a basket to hold the fruit. Thus armed, she had set off through the grounds and out into the open countryside. Cranworth Wood had always been an ideal spot for blackberries. In a secluded clearing beyond the trees was a great quantity of brambles, usually laden with the choicest of berries at this time of year. Cook would be pleased to have the fruit, although her preserves could never be considered a serious rival of Mrs. Jewitt's.

Firmly Antonia put behind her all thoughts of Jewitt's farm and the riders who had set out in its direction. She walked in a leisurely manner, the basket swinging from one hand, delighting in the feel of the sun upon her uncovered hair. Had Ellen not been fully occupied with her other grievances, no doubt she would have tried to insist that her mistress wore a hat.

The brambles were laden with ripe berries, as she had expected. Diligently she began to pick them, first thrusting her cotton gloves into the pocket tied about her waist. She would be able to return home in a dignified manner, stained hands hidden in her gloves!

The basket was almost half-full when Antonia halted in her task, sucking absently at a pricked finger. During the half-hour or so that she had been bending over the brambles, she had been vaguely aware of the drone of bees and other insects, the occasional song of a bird, the rustle of some small creature scuttling through the waist-high meadowsweet. But now, as she paused, a new sound reached her ears—the sound of voices. Annoyed, for she was enjoying her chosen solitude, she

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picked up her basket and retreated hastily behind a bush over which the brambles rioted. She had no wish to be seen in her juice-stained state, although she was curious of the identity of the speakers. No doubt it was someone with no right to be in the wood at all. Suddenly realising that it was possible—if unlikely—that these people might resent her presence, fearing to be reported for trespassing, she took another backward step, intending to leave the wood with all good speed.

She cannoned heavily into something solid and gave a muffled exclamation, only just managing to retain a hold on her basket of blackberries. In doing so, her eyes lighted upon a pair of booted feet beside her russet skirt. With a gasp of shock, she realised that she had collided not with a tree as she had supposed, but with a man.

"Sh—sh!" murmured Justin Garth, a finger to his lips. Antonia stared up in sheer amazement and opened her mouth to speak. Before she could utter a word she found that Mr. Garth was holding her in front of him with one arm, whilst his free hand had sealed her lips, thus ensuring that she obeyed his demand for silence.

Forced to lean back against his broad chest, Antonia felt a tremor of some unnamed emotion run through her. Unable to move, she kept a tight grip on her basket and attempted to turn her head round to look at her captor. Justin Garth smiled down into her startled grey eyes and he bent his head to whisper: "Bear with me and be silent! There's a good girl!"

She struggled anew, then was still, realising that the voices she had heard were nearer now. The hand across her mouth relaxed, then was removed, although Justin Garth's arm still held her against him. He was dressed

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for riding as she had seen him when he set out earlier, a hard-crowned hat set jauntily upon his crisp dark hair.

"What *are* you about, sir?" she rebuked him in an indignant whisper, only to be half-stifled as his hand clapped firmly about her mouth once more.

"Be still! I will explain later," he hissed, his breath warm against her cheek.

Antonia gave up the unequal struggle and obeyed him. It would seem that Mr. Garth was intent upon eavesdropping and whether she liked it or not she must do the same.

"When will you next see him?" came a low, yet clearly audible voice from the other side of the bushes.

Justin Garth stiffened and the arm about Antonia's waist tightened so that she could scarcely breathe. Her gasp of protest was muffled by the hand at her mouth.

"Tonight, sir," came the reply in a feminine tone. "I will see him tonight."

"Then give him this note, my girl, if you will," said the first voice, which was oddly familiar to Antonia. Of the girl's identity she was not in any doubt, yet the man—?

"I can trust you, I hope?" he went on. "It is important that he receives word from me."

There was a crackle of paper as the note changed hands. This noise masked the girl's next words, but she must have only bidden her companion farewell, for Antonia could hear her moving away now through the wood.

The man remained where he was for a moment, whistling tunelessly between his teeth, then to Antonia's horror the sound grew louder as if he were

about to come into view round the bushes. Justin Garth must have expected this to happen for he crouched lower, pulling her down with him, and her heart began to beat more rapidly. She thought that he must surely feel the bumping of it against his arm. She closed her eyes, willing the man whose conversation they had overheard to go on his way without discovering her hiding behind a bush in Justin Garth's arms. Not even her brother Kit had ever held her so closely, and as for William Drew, who had some thought of marrying her—

Mr. Garth had better have a good explanation for his cavalier treatment of her, she thought, trying to mask an almost pleasurable embarrassment with a spurt of righteous indignation.

She felt something brush her forehead and her eyes flew open to stare upwards into the blue ones of Justin Garth.

"We're safe! He has gone!" announced Justin cheerily. He helped her to her feet then stood back a pace, studying her flushed cheeks with undisguised amusement. "I am sorry I had to use you so ill, Antonia," he went on in a far from apologetic tone. "It would not have done for you to have spoken out and betrayed our presence behind the brambles, now would it? Confess that we would have looked foolish, Antonia!"

She busied herself with attempting to untangle a trailing bramble from the skirt of her russet gown, noting the free use he was making of her name, somehow unable to meet the teasing expression on his disturbingly handsome face.

"Oh—*come!*" he said impatiently and bent to free her skirt himself.

Antonia looked down at the dark curling hair on his bent head—his hat had fallen off—and had an almost overwhelming desire to touch it and discover if it were as firm and springy as it looked. She flushed violently, clenching her hands tightly behind her back.

"There!" she heard him say. "I think you are free now. I—ah!"

A horrid sound of tearing cloth greeted her ears as she stepped back from him.

"Now see what I have done!" said Justin ruefully. He rose to his feet and dusted clinging strands of grass from his knees. "I am afraid that I have torn your gown."

Antonia glanced down at a three-cornered tear in the hem of her skirt. This small diversion had served her as a pause in which to regain her composure.

"It doesn't matter," she reassured him, almost smiling at his comical expression of regret. "It is an old gown." She drew in a deep breath and met his eyes squarely. "Now, sir, I will have your explanation," she said with a firmness which was completely assumed, for his nearness had set her off-balance. "Do not pretend that we hid merely to conceal ourselves, Mr. Garth. You came here especially to listen to that conversation, did you not? I am not a fool, sir, so do not think to fob me off with half-answers!"

Justin Garth's eyes twinkled although his expression was rueful. He did not reply, so Antonia went on determinedly: "That was Betsy, my new maid, for I recognised her voice. I am almost certain that the man

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with her was your cousin Dominic, yet why he should come here secretly to give her a note eludes me at present."

Justin sighed.

"I did not take you for a fool, Antonia," he said gently, "but there is a tale behind this meeting in the woods. It is too long and involved for me to disclose to you now—even if I *do* decide to confide in you."

"Oh!" she said, bending to pick up her basket of blackberries. Silently she handed him his hat, which had rolled off when he crouched with her behind the bush. "But it *was* Dominic with Betsy, was it not?" she persisted. She put behind her the emotions which had surged through her when she found herself held in his arms. If he did not find it a cause for embarrassment then nor must she. "It was Dominic, was it not?" she repeated.

Justin Garth nodded and helped himself to a blackberry from her basket. Antonia gazed up at him wide-eyed as he put the fruit in his mouth and grinned at her. She had not thought such an action would come from a gentleman of fashion!

"It was my cousin Dom," he admitted, eyeing the basket as if seeking a choicer berry.

"And you were following him—spying upon him?" asked Antonia doubtfully.

Justin selected another blackberry.

"Am I my cousin's keeper?" he murmured obscurely. "There lies the answer, Antonia. Dominic is both foolish and indiscreet—"

Antonia nodded and interrupted him, meeting his eyes squarely.

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"Something has puzzled me about the night our coach was held up," she said. "Dominic was one of those men, was he not? I—I had half-decided that it was *you*, sir. I thought that you must be in league with Captain Starr—oh!"

Her juice-stained hand flew guiltily to her mouth.

Justin Garth's expression changed. He reached out and took her firmly by the shoulders.

"Antonia—look at me," he demanded. "What do you know of highwaymen? You must not seek to involve yourself. I have been convinced for some time that something troubles you, my dear. Who is this Captain Starr?"

She bit her lip, wishing that she had held her tongue.

"He is a highwayman and—and father to my maid, Betsy," she said haltingly, "but you must not speak of him to anyone or I—"

"You?" he interrupted, his grip upon her shoulders tightening. "You speak as if this concerns you personally. How can this be?"

Antonia dropped her eyes in alarm and shook her head stubbornly. She must not place too great a degree of trust in him. He had not denied that his cousin had ridden with the highwayman. She would *not* confide Captain Starr's revelation to him. No one must ever discover that Kit's father was a common highwayman.

Justin gave a sigh and released her.

"I must go now, or I shall be missed," he said, his tone abrupt. "My horse is tethered out of sight some way back. I must rejoin the riding-party before Dom, if possible. I wonder what excuse he will use for *his* absence? I shall declare that I lost my way."

"Had—had you reached Jewitt's farm?" murmured Antonia.

"No," he said. "I noticed that Dom was holding back his horse in a somewhat furtive manner. I left the group several minutes after him. You see—or rather, you do *not* see, my dear!—that it is important I do not lose track of his movements."

"Oh!" said Antonia, impressed by his stern expression. "I can direct you on a short-cut to the farm, if you wish to reach it before your cousin," she suggested diffidently.

"You can?" he said eagerly, his face relaxing into a smile. "Then direct away, Antonia, for I'd as lief have Cousin Dom kept in ignorance of my infamous spying conduct!"

She gave her directions as briefly as possible, realising that he must now feel that she was upon his side against his cousin. Probably he would think her so swayed by his charm that she would do *anything* for him. She reined in her thoughts sharply. She was not being fair. Justin Garth had made no attempt at blinding her with charm. She started when she saw that he was taking farewell of her. He raised her hand, berry-juice and all, to his lips.

"We have much to discuss, Antonia," he said, "so do not think to continue avoiding me in that foolish manner which has been so noticeable. I will see you later! Goodbye—and thank you!"

He put another of her blackberries into his mouth, grinned once more, than made off through the trees towards the place where he had left his horse.

Slowly Antonia began to pick berries, her mind any-

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where but on the task in hand. She felt completely stunned by the afternoon's dramatic events.

Dominic Garth had come to the wood to give a note to Betsy—presumably for her highwayman father. Justin, for some undisclosed reason, was keeping a close watch on his cousin's movements. Yet for all this, Antonia found herself thinking only of Justin Garth himself. He had forced her to hide in an undignified manner behind a bush, making her a party to his spying. He had used her name freely, eaten her blackberries and grinned at her in an engaging way more suited to a schoolboy than an elegant man of fashion. He had kissed her hand and—unless she was much mistaken—her forehead, too. Yet wait—her eyes had been closed, she reasoned. *Anything* could have brushed against her brow. She was behaving as foolishly as a romantic schoolroom miss!

The afternoon was well advanced when her basket was at last full of berries. Antonia, her hands stained and her gown torn, was reluctant to go home. Ellen would be most annoyed with her appearance.

Justin Garth's promise to question her further about Captain Starr had been in the manner of a threat. He might voice his queries lightly enough but he would expect answers, not evasion. Frowningly, she pondered on what she must say when next they met. One thing was clear—she must never betray the fact of Kit's parentage, whatever else she was obliged to disclose.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHEN the riding-party returned from Jewitt's farm, the Bowden girls and the Garth cousins paused to take further refreshment at Rawling House. Clarissa was in a pettish mood for she had not failed to note Dominic Garth's absence on the journey to the farm. He was too casual by half, she informed her alarmed mother. Mrs. Wade was quick to protest at her daughter's annoyed condemnation, for she had no desire to lose Dominic's fortune and title through Clarissa's wilfulness.

Clarissa did not confide her disapproval of Dominic Garth in her cousin, for Antonia kept prudently to her own room until the riders had left. She did not intend to meet Justin Garth so soon after her disquieting time with him in Cranworth Wood.

The next day dawned with leaden skies and by breakfast-time the rain was falling steadily. It continued to do so more or less incessantly for the next three days and everyone who had no real need to do otherwise, kept within doors.

The break in the weather meant that no one rode over from the Bowden home. At first Antonia was glad to have a respite from Justin's threatened questioning, then, perversely, the rain-washed windows began to irritate her and she half-wished that Mr. Garth would brave the elements and ride over to Rawling House.

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"It will be fine tomorrow," said Kit confidently on the afternoon of the third wet day. He had just completed a tour of the estate with his manager, William Drew, and the two of them were standing in the hall of the Rawling home, water running off their clothing in miniature rivulets.

"Oh—do you really think so?" asked Antonia eagerly from the foot of the stairs. "I—I am so tired of keeping within doors," she added lamely as Mr. Drew turned and directed her a questioning look.

A maidservant carried off the men's wet outer clothing and Antonia prepared to escape up to her room. Unless she was much mistaken she had seen an uncomfortably purposeful gleam in William's eye.

"No—wait, Miss Antonia, please!"

She halted upon the stairs and turned her head unwillingly. Kit had gone, doubtless to rid himself of his muddied boots. William Drew stood looking up at her, his expression vaguely disapproving. With a sigh of repressed resentment, Antonia descended to stand beside him.

"Yes, William, what is it?" she murmured patiently. "And I thought I had given you permission to use my name without Miss-ing me?"

"Of course—Antonia. You do me great honour," he said weightily.

With difficulty she kept a hold of her patience, marvelling that she had ever thought he was anything but pompous.

"Is it important, William?" she asked. "I was about to go to my room."

"It is of importance to me," he agreed heavily. He

glanced around to check that they would not be overheard. "Yet I scarcely know where to begin, for I have so little right to judge you."

She blinked at the censure in his tone and cast over in her mind for any way in which she might have offended him. Indeed she could think of nothing, save the fact that she had been avoiding his company of late. Perhaps that was it? As she pondered, part of her mind rejected his assumption that he had *any* right to judge or question her.

About to give voice to a sharp retort, she saw the anxious hurt in his expression and her feeling of rebellion subsided. It was pointless to strive to make William feel himself a proper member of the household if she were to resort to setting him in his place as if he were naught but a forward servant.

"I am sorry if I have offended you in any way, William," she said carefully. "Perhaps you would care to explain?"

William Drew flushed a dull red and after several false starts and much glancing about the hall for suspected eavesdroppers, revealed the cause for his perturbation.

"You went berry-picking on the afternoon of the ride to Jewitt's farm," he said bluntly. "I—I noticed that both of the Garths were missing for a time. When he returned, the older one, Justin, had a juice stain on his hand. He—he took off his glove and I could not help but see it," finished William, quailing a little before Antonia's undoubted anger.

Mixed with her anger was an odd feeling of guilt, as if William had caught her out in a doubtful situation. "Perhaps Mr. Garth has a fondness for blackber-

ries?" she suggested evenly, although she knew that her colour had risen. "Why must you assume that he was with me?"

William Drew stared at her stonily.

"You do not deny that you met him that afternoon?" he demanded.

"Why should I do anything of the kind?" she retorted. "I will deny that a meeting was *arranged*—if that is the purpose of your inquisition."

William bit upon his lip.

"I beg pardon," he said stiffly. "It is not my concern—but it *should* be so, if we are to be wed one day—"

"Are we to wed?" said Antonia slowly, her anger evaporating. She sighed. "I am no longer sure of anything, William, but I do not recall promising to marry you, nor do I recall that you have ever made me an offer."

As always, she was unwilling to cause unnecessary distress and she found herself attempting to coax Mr. Drew into a better humour.

"William," she went on gently, "now is not the time to discuss the future. I value your friendship but—" her voice hardened despite herself, "I will cease to do so if you continue to *spy* upon me and to voice unpleasant insinuations."

She turned to leave him, expecting the matter to rest there, for William did not normally have the spirit to argue with her, a virtue she secretly deplored. Yet his voice followed her as she mounted the stairs and she was disturbed to realise that he was trembling with uncharacteristic rage.

"Those Garths are no good," he uttered unsteadily.

"I know more about them than you do, Antonia—especially about the handsome Mr. Justin. Your cousin, Miss Clarissa, knows, too. Ask her if you will not listen to me. *She* knows all about his wild lawlessness. It is a good thing that he and his cousin have gone. I hope they will never return!"

The outer door slammed shut behind William Drew before Antonia's dazed mind could digest what he had said. Silently she made her way to her own room, her mind not on William Drew's vicious remarks but on his final statement.

"He said that Justin has gone!" she whispered in empty bewilderment.

Where had the Garth cousins gone? Why had they left in such haste? She was convinced that neither Clarissa nor Aunt Hetta could know of their departure. She had told herself that she did not wish to meet with Justin again—to face his questions about the highwaymen. Yet if the Garths were truly gone and did not return—what then? With a sigh which was curiously close to a sob, she entered her bed-chamber and crossed to stare unseeingly from the window.

Perhaps she had read too much into Justin Garth's manner towards her? Yet she knew that he did not dislike her. On the afternoon in Cranworth Wood he had trusted her and had obliged her to become a party to his spying. She was suddenly convinced that he was involved in something greater than she had at first envisaged. He had spoken with all seriousness when he declared that he must keep an eye at all times upon his cousin Dominic.

William Drew had indicated that he knew something to Justin's discredit, she remembered. He had also informed her that Clarissa—of all people—knew it too. With sudden determination, Antonia decided that she must seek out her cousin and demand an explanation.

She paused in the act of opening the door. First she must marshal her thoughts! Captain Starr, a highwayman, had declared himself to be father to her brother Kit. Dominic Garth had some connection with Captain Starr. The highwayman's daughter had become a part of the Rawling household *and* was known by Dominic. Justin Garth was determined to keep an eye upon his cousin's movements but seemed ignorant of the reasons for his association with law-breakers.

Antonia gave a heavy sigh. None of these facts served to give her explanation of why William Drew should declare *Justin* to be wild and lawless. She placed little reliance in Clarissa being of any help but could see no harm in questioning her cousin.

* * *

"A *duel*?" echoed Antonia, her grey eyes wide with disbelief. "I cannot think where you got the idea that Mr. Garth has fought a duel, Clarissa!"

Clarissa Wade sniffed, her expression triumphant.

"Patricia Bowden overheard her parents talking about it," she said spitefully. "You think you are such a good judge of character, do you not, Cousin Tonia? Well—your fine Mr. Garth has been having a disgraceful association with a married lady and has fought a duel with her *husband* over her. Is it not shocking? That is why he must hide in the country with his kind cousin

to bear him company. You see, if the lady's husband dies, then Justin will be arrested—unless he can flee the country in time!”

Clarissa stared gleefully for a moment as the colour drained from Antonia's face leaving her chalk-white, then her expression altered.

“Tonia, I am sorry!” she said in a shamed voice. “Come, sit down or you will swoon on me. I am a complete *fiend*, I do declare! I did not mean to frighten you so, for I know that you think well of Mr. Garth. Things may not be so bad, after all, for the man may live on to a ripe old age. I am sure he will not wish to cause a scandal by letting the world know that his wife preferred Mr. Garth to himself!”

Antonia took no comfort from this belated attempt at reassurance. She sank down limply into a chair, her eyes upon the now anxious Clarissa.

“Shall I ring for Ellen to come to you?” muttered the younger girl. “Oh—*Tonia!* I would not need to be so horrid if you were not so *good*. You are constantly held before me as a model of perfection! I only meant to tease you, for you have not known Justin Garth long enough to have formed a proper *attachment*—”

Clarissa chattered on, her former spite lost in guilt rather than remorse.

“Do cheer up, Tonia!” she urged. “Or Mama will scold me for upsetting you.”

“I am perfectly all right,” said Antonia distinctly and restrainedly. Then she left the room hurriedly before the relieved Clarissa could observe that she was close to tears.

Young Betsy must have been in the act of entering for Antonia walked straight into the girl in the doorway. With an effort she recovered her composure and said quietly:

“Yes, Betsy? Do you require anything of me?”

The girl flushed and looked away, shaking her head. With a swish of cotton skirts she departed in haste for the kitchen quarters, leaving Antonia to stare after her in perplexity. Had Betsy been listening at the door? Was the girl just naturally inquisitive or had she any real motive in playing the spy?

Upon further reflection, Antonia began to doubt the wisdom of taking Betsy into the household. If Captain Starr and his associates were planning to rob Rawling House, having the highwayman's daughter upon the inside must surely be an advantage. No one but Antonia knew the girl's true identity and Captain Starr did not expect that *she* would speak and put her brother's name in jeopardy.

Antonia gave herself a mental shake. If Captain Starr had been bent upon robbery, then surely he would have achieved his purpose by now? She did not believe that he was truly ill-intentioned. His concern for Betsy had seemed as genuine as his claim of being Kit's father.

Why had Dominic Garth sent a note through Betsy to her father? *Was* something unlawful being planned in the neighbourhood? Perhaps Antonia had given aid to a proposed crime when she agreed to give Betsy a home.

Yet all worries and speculation faded before the all-important fact that the Garths had left the Bowden home. Had Justin known that he was to leave so soon?

Was their growing relationship nothing but a figment of Antonia's imagination? Did Justin think so little of her that he could leave without even bidding her farewell?

She did not like to dwell too deeply on what Clarissa had told her, yet the unwelcome news of Justin's involvement with a married woman could scarcely be ignored. Had he, in fact, fought a duel, or had Patricia Bowden misheard when she eavesdropped upon her parents' conversation? If Justin's heart was already given, then Antonia had best cease indulging herself in hopeful fancies, she told herself roundly.

CHAPTER EIGHT

IT WAS evening and the rain was still falling steadily from a pewter-grey sky. There was no sign of a break in the solidity of the clouds. Antonia entered the library, a candle in her hand, and began to seek a book from the shelves. She scanned the titles half-heartedly. The weather, amongst other things, was having a depressing effect upon her normally calm and cheerful nature, and she wished that something—*anything*—would happen to relieve the monotony of the past few days.

There had still been no news from the Bowden home and it was pointless to hope that Patricia and Caroline might decide to ride over, for the road must be well-nigh impassable. The dried-out ruts of summer would now be ankle-deep in mud.

Running a finger along the leather binding of the books before her, Antonia thought unwillingly of William Drew. He appeared to have adopted a somewhat cool manner towards her and although she told herself that she was indifferent to his moods, his coolness had upset her a little. Perhaps she was too much used to having him complaisant to her every wish, she told herself wryly.

Not the smallest of her anxieties involved the truth behind the reasons for the Garths' visit to Yorkshire. Clarissa had been emphatic in her belief that Justin might, at any moment, be obliged to flee the country,

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but then Clarissa always *had* enjoyed a sense of high drama, Antonia consoled herself.

Her thoughts moved on to consider Betsy. She knew that she was not imagining the girl's watchfulness. It was becoming obvious that Betsy's main interest did not lie in learning to be a good lady's maid. She was silent and secretive in her manner, in contrast to the picture of innocent eagerness which she had at first presented.

Antonia gave a violent start and dropped the leather-bound volume she had been holding. Someone was standing outside the glass doors! She could see the form of a man's figure, motionless out there on the terrace. Perhaps he had been watching her for some time?

Reluctantly she moved towards the doors, candle in hand. It could only be Captain Starr. No one but he would come a-calling at this hour and in this heavy rain.

She peered through the glass at the stocky, cloaked figure, noting without surprise the masked features and the heavy shoulders. With a weary sigh she opened the door.

"Yes?" she said brusquely. "What do you want with me? Have you more favours to ask?"

Her tone was more bitter than she had intended and the highwayman stared at her in silence as he entered the room and stood upon the carpet, great spots of water splashing down from his clothing. Antonia took in a breath of the cool damp air before he pushed the door shut softly.

"I only came to see how Betsy has settled in," he said in an oddly diffident voice.

Antonia was instantly ashamed of her ill-humour and

marvelled wryly that she should feel to be in the wrong. She had the strangest kind of conscience!

"Betsy is well," she admitted, attempting to smile, "though I am not sure that she enjoys being employed as a maid."

"It may not be for much longer," said the man slowly. "I have been making certain arrangements down south. The time will come when I can give up this life and live properly again with Betsy to keep house for me."

Antonia detected a note of yearning in his voice and, despite herself, was interested in his future plans.

"You will give up your—your profession?" she said eagerly. "Oh—I am glad to hear it, for I should not wish you to be hanged for your crimes!"

She saw him smile in the candlelight and added stiffly, lest he should think her too friendly in her manner:

"I should not wish my brother's father to meet with such an unpleasant end."

Captain Starr uttered a short laugh.

"You're an odd sort of female, Antonia Rawling!" he informed her. "I take it 'twill meet with your approval if I turn respectable and make a proper home for my daughter?"

"It is not right that a young girl should be involved with highwaymen," said Antonia primly. "You should not make her carry letters to yourself from your accomplices, for you are sharing your guilt with her."

"Letters?" Captain Starr frowned and he gripped Antonia suddenly by the shoulders. "Who says that Betsy's been taking letters? I know naught of it."

Antonia stared up into his masked face.

"Dominic Garth gave her a letter," she said. "You know him well enough, I take it? Do not deny that he helped you to hold up our coach on the night we first met, for I'll not believe you. He is a highwayman, too! I—I wish the Garths had never come into the district!"

To her horror, she found that tears were coursing unchecked down her cheeks. The highwayman's hands were suddenly gentle upon her shoulders.

"Now, Toni-love, this won't do!" he said gruffly. "You are not the weeping sort. Tell me what is wrong."

She forgot for the moment that he was a lawless highway robber and had a strange urge to confide in him.

"Everything is wrong!" she choked. "My life was calm and well ordered and now everything has altered. Nothing will ever be the same again!"

"You do not weep on *my* account," he said, giving her a gentle shake. "Surely 'tis not for that scapegrace, Dominic? He's not at all your style, my dear."

She stared at him, her tears ceasing.

"*Dominic!*" she murmured. "Of course I would not weep for Dominic!"

A sound at the library door told her that someone was about to enter. She gave a gasp of panic and reached for the glass door.

"Go!" she hissed. "You must not be seen! Someone is coming!"

Her shoulders were released and the highwayman vanished into the shadows of the terrace, the door closing behind him. Antonia turned slowly and leaned back against it, brushing tears from her cheeks with the

back of her hand. Her candle in its holder was upon a nearby table although she could not remember having put it there. Its poor light had flickered madly in the draught from the open door but now it was burning steadily again. It lit up the youthfully stern features of her brother Kit as he moved across the room towards her. She let out a sigh of relief that it was not her cousin, Clarissa.

"Tonia," said Kit frowningly. "I thought it was you. I heard voices in here. Who was with you? It could not be William Drew for he is still at outs with you!"

Antonia tried to smile.

"As you see, I am quite alone, Kit," she said, her voice unsteady.

Kit stared pointedly at the wet footmarks on the carpet beside the glass door.

"You are alone now," he said, hurt creeping into his voice and emphasizing his youth. "You do not confide in me these days," he said stiffly. "You are my sister, and I will not have you unhappy."

He waited expectantly and Antonia made a hasty decision.

"I did not wish to worry you, love," she said. "If I do confide in you, then you must promise not to speak of what I tell you."

Kit's eyes widened and he grinned at her.

"Who can I talk to, Tonia?" he scoffed. "There is no one here but our feather-headed aunt and cousin and the humourless William Drew!"

Briefly she revealed to him a little about Captain Starr and the circumstances of Betsy's coming into the household. To keep him in complete ignorance might

be dangerous, for Kit could be tenacious when he so chose. Better tell him a little than have him probe and discover the whole! He must never suspect that a common highwayman was his father!

"You were talking to a *highwayman*?" said Kit in amazement.

He stared eagerly past her at the darkened terrace but could see nothing.

Antonia sighed.

"You seem friendly enough with Dominic Garth," she said warningly. "Do not think to confide in him, if he should return. *He* is close with this Captain Starr and actually helped to hold up our coach that night. You must not trust Dominic, Kit, nor his cousin either," she added, choking back the feeling that she was being disloyal to Justin in his absence.

Kit nodded gravely.

"Dom is a wild one," he said sagely. "You do not completely surprise me. He may seem quiet enough to you, Tonia, but he's wild for all that." He frowned thoughtfully at his sister's tear-streaked face but forebore to comment upon it. "Dom may be a desperate highwayman to enliven his evening hours," he went on, "but Justin is too strait-laced for anything so devious, Tonia. 'Twould amaze me to discover that *he* is at anything against the law. He's a capital fellow and worth ten of his cousin. There's more thought and depth to him. I doubt there's any true compassion at the root of Dom's nature—although he is lively enough to have around," he allowed.

Kit's praise of the absent Justin only served to bring a fresh flow of tears to Antonia's eyes. She bit hard upon her lip to stem them, despising her own weakness.

Suddenly it mattered very much that Kit should think well of Justin. Surely *he* would not believe what Clarissa had told her? Perhaps it was best that she did not speak to him of this. Instead she said unsteadily:

"Kit—promise me that you will keep silent. No one must learn of tonight's visitor. It is important that no one knows about Captain Starr!"

Kit put a brotherly arm about her, picked up the candle and led her to the library door.

"You must not worry so, Tonia!" he said, giving her shoulders a gentle squeeze. "I have not seen you so close to tears since your old dog died—poor moth-eaten old rag-bag that he was," he added irreverently.

Antonia tried to smile at him.

"Sim was devoted to me," she said. "You must not mock, for he was a good friend. If I recall correctly—I was not alone in my weeping," she reminded him.

Kit was pleased to have diverted her and he pretended indignation.

"I was a full-grown man when the animal died," he said, then smiled. "He was so pathetic at the end—anyone who kept dry-eyed at that time had no heart at all. Poor old Sim!"

When she was alone again, Antonia realised that Kit had not promised to keep silent and she hoped that she could trust his good sense. For all his declaration that he was adult, to her he was still her young brother. If only there were someone else in whom she might confide! Kit would not be a wise choice of confidant anyway, for he was too closely linked with the highwayman. She hoped fervently that he might never discover this link. Poor Kit was very proud of his home and lineage. Not

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from her would he ever learn that his right to live here could be in dispute.

Not until she was in her bed that night did Antonia's thoughts pinpoint something which had troubled her subconsciously. Her unaccustomed tears had softened Captain Starr's mood, putting him off guard. What had he called her? Had she heard him correctly?

"Now, Toni-love, this will not do."

His exact words seemed to float back to her in the darkness of her bed-chamber.

Toni-love!

Long ago, someone else had called her thus. It had been a special pet-name and she had completely forgotten it. How could the highwayman—of all people—come to have spoken it so comfortingly?

Antonia closed her eyes, conjuring up an image of herself as a small child, of a tall, broad-shouldered man who swung her up in his arms and chanted: "Toni! Toni! Toni-love!"

"No!"

She sat bolt upright in her bed, clutching the coverings about her for reassurance. Shivering violently with something more than actual physical cold, she shook her head repeatedly to rid herself of the unwelcome suggestion which had insinuated itself into her unreceptive mind.

"No!" she whispered almost on a sob. "No, I will never believe it!"

CHAPTER NINE

ON THE following morning Caroline and Patricia Bowden arrived at Rawling House, plentifully spattered with mud but in high spirits.

"Such rain!" giggled Patricia to Clarissa. "I vow I thought 'twould never stop falling!"

"I am glad you have come," said Clarissa pettishly, "for I'm bored half to death. There is no lively company *here*."

She nodded across the room to where Antonia was sitting in conversation with Caroline. Patricia raised a questioning brow and lowered her voice.

"Is Antonia upset? Have you told her about Justin's trouble?" she whispered, half-eager, half-ashamed. "Perhaps you should have said nothing for *I* should not have listened to what Papa was saying. Poor Antonia appeared to find Justin attractive—from all you have told me. She will not wish to think ill of him."

"*Poor* Tonia?" sniffed Clarissa. "Lucky Tonia would fit better. At least she has a proper home and does not need to rely upon the charity of others as *I* do!"

"Sh—sh!" muttered Patricia uncomfortably. "She will hear you!"

But Antonia, deep in conversation with Caroline Bowden, was unaware that she was being discussed. Caroline had started off upon the subject of the Garths'

visit without any prompting and Antonia was eager to learn as much as possible without confessing to more than casual interest in Justin.

"Mama says that Justin and Dominic will soon return to us," said Caroline, unaware of the way in which her listener's heart leaped at this innocuous remark. "We did not even know that they were to leave so suddenly. 'Twas quite a surprise to learn that Dominic had ridden off in the early hours of the morning—"

"*Dominic?*" interrupted Antonia hastily. "Did his cousin not leave with him?"

"Oh, no!" Caroline shook her head. "When we came down to breakfast, Justin remarked upon his cousin's absence and Papa said that Dom had left at first light on some kind of urgent business. Papa is a *very* early riser, otherwise he too would have been in ignorance of Dom's departure."

Antonia frowned thoughtfully.

"Did Justin—Mr. Garth—appear surprised that his cousin had left?" she asked, glad that Caroline was not the person to find such questioning strange.

"That was perhaps the oddest part of it," confessed Caroline, pulling her chair a little closer to the hearth and holding out chilled hands to the blaze. "Justin seemed very put out by Dom's departure. He had a talk with Papa, then he left too. We have just had word that we are to expect them back very shortly."

Antonia had not seen her aunt's approach and started as Henrietta Wade spoke behind her chair.

"So Dominic will return soon? I am very glad to hear it and I am assured that Clarissa will be too. We knew that he would not stay away long!" she added archly,

then crossed the room, no doubt to regale her daughter with the happy tidings.

Caroline made a tiny grimace at Antonia.

"Your aunt seems set on making a match between Dominic and Clarissa, does she not? I doubt she'll have success in *that* direction. For all that we give the Garths hospitality, I know that my parents would not judge either of them as suitable husbands for myself or my sister—not *now*," she added.

Antonia felt the colour rise in her cheeks but managed to ask why this must be so.

Caroline looked uncomfortable.

"It seems that Dom's mother is a friend of Mama's and the visit was her suggestion. There has been some kind of trouble for the Garths which makes it imperative for them to keep to the country."

Antonia felt a shiver run through her.

"Clarissa spoke of a—a duel," she murmured hesitantly.

"My sister Patsy should not listen at doors!" retorted Caroline. "I told her that she had probably misheard, but she would not heed me. I know that she and your cousin have made much of this story—choosing Justin as scapegoat. Dominic's reputation must stay white as driven snow, of course!" she added, wrinkling her nose comically.

Antonia eyed the girl curiously. First Kit had suggested that Dominic Garth was not the straightforward character he appeared. Now it seemed, from the tone of her voice, that Caroline Bowden endorsed this opinion.

"I like Justin better than Dom!" confessed Caroline frankly. "Dom has such an air of biding his time. I

know he only put up with the visit because of his mother's persuasion, whereas Justin really enjoyed being with us." She smiled. "We must not expect men of fashion to find our country life vastly exciting, but Justin did appear genuinely happy to be with us. *You* like him very much, do you not, Tonia?" she said suddenly, turning sympathetic eyes upon her friend.

Caught unawares, Antonia blushed and looked away.

"I—yes," she admitted quietly.

"He has a high opinion of your talent as a musician," went on Caroline warmly. "I thought the way in which he came over to congratulate your performance that day was quite *romantic*," she said hopefully.

If she had expected any kind of girlish confidence, she was doomed to disappointment, for Antonia, composure restored, merely said sedately:

"He seems a pleasant person and appreciates music."

Deftly she turned the conversation and when Clarissa and Patricia came across the room to join them beside the fire, they were chatting inconsequentially of the weather.

When the Bowden girls had left for home—collecting their patiently waiting groom from the kitchen as they went—Antonia discovered that Caroline's friendly praise of Justin Garth had heartened her somewhat. Surely only flutterbrains like Clarissa, Aunt Hetta and Patsy Bowden would stoop to think ill of him? Kit had named him a "capital fellow" and Caroline had found him "genuine". Both Kit and Caroline—and Captain Starr also—had found fault

with Dominic. If there *had* been a duel and the promise of scandal to come, then surely *Dominic* was a likelier candidate than his cousin?

She wished she had not brought Captain Starr's name into her thoughts, for she had spent a sleepless night in speculating on exactly why this man, a self-confessed highwayman, should call her by what had been a special pet-name of her childhood days. The only feasible explanation had been so startling that she had been unable to seek escape from it in sleep. Instead she had tossed wakefully all night.

* * *

Antonia sat at her harp, long-fingered hands caressing its strings with a loving, confident touch. Softly she began to play the Elizabethan air "Greensleeves" which had long been a favourite of hers. Liquid notes of almost unearthly beauty filled the silence of the room. When beset by worry, only her beloved music could soothe her anxious mind.

Beginning the tune once more, she sang the words, softly at first, then allowing her voice to rise in a crescendo of impassioned song.

Close at hand a door opened then closed again, and with a start she faltered and stilled the throbbing harp-strings with her palms. Slowly she turned upon her stool, then rose to her feet, colour flooding her cheeks.

"Bravo, Antonia!" applauded Justin Garth from the door. "Please do not get up. Play for me, my dear. I promise I will sit silent as the grave—"

"No! I—I cannot take any more time to play today!" she stammered incoherently. Her heart was thumping rapidly within her and her colour rose once more as he

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raised a quizzical brow at her obvious confusion. "I must go to my aunt," she said untruthfully. "You will please excuse me, sir!"

He frowned at her lack of warmth, his blue eyes suddenly hard, and stepped aside as if to allow her to pass through the door. Yet even as she came near he changed his mind and reached out swiftly to take hold of her wrists.

Finding herself unable to move, Antonia's eyes grew wide and almost fearful as she raised them slowly to look at her captor.

"Y-you are hurting me, Justin," she whispered at last.

"Ah—then I am to be 'Justin' and not merely 'sir'?" he said, relaxing his hold. He looked down in disbelief at the red marks his fingers had made upon her wrists.

"I am a brute!" he said unexpectedly, then raised her hands, brushing each wrist in turn with his lips. "I hoped that you might be glad to see me, Antonia," he added as he released her.

She took a deep breath, then admitted in a shamefaced whisper:

"I am very glad you have returned. 'Twas ill-mannered of me to try to leave so abruptly. You startled me. I—I had thought myself to be alone."

He looked down at her unsmilingly, his eyes very blue, then took her hand and led her back towards her harp.

"Come, sit down again," he suggested, going on as she obeyed him: "You cannot think what a charming picture you make together, the angelic 'Greensleeves'

and her harp. Would that everything could be as calm and tranquil as the green-gowned Antonia at her music!"

His tone was flippant now, but looking up at him she saw that his eyes were weary and shadowed and a half-frown marred his brow.

"Justin—you are tired," she said with sudden compassion.

He sighed.

"Cousin Dom led me a merry dance," he said. "One of these days I will cease to nursemaid him—or will I? The alternative might lie upon my conscience for ever."

Antonia ran her fingers softly across the harpstrings.

"Without you, might Dominic meet his deserts and end his days as do many highwaymen?" she whispered. "Is that why you seek to guard him—to keep him from the hangman's noose?"

Justin did not reply. Instead he took her hands and raised her to her feet once more.

"I wish—" he murmured, then bent his head and kissed her full on the lips. "Antonia," he said then, his arms cradling her against him, "you cannot think how many times I have resisted the urge to kiss you!"

For a glad, heart-stopping moment she was content to rest her head against his chest, to put her arms about him. Then, with a gasp of realisation, she struggled to free herself.

Justin looked down, a smile upon his disturbingly handsome features.

"Will you not be still, love?" he complained.

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She beat so fiercely at him with clenched hands that he released her at last. Taking a backward step, Antonia shook her head, cheeks burning.

"I had forgotten!" she choked. "Justin—is it true? Clarissa told me about the duel and the—the married woman. I should not have let you kiss me! *Is it true, Justin?*"

Justin Garth froze and his teasing smile vanished. Angry colour showed at his cheekbones and his jaw tightened. He stared at her for a moment, then gave a curt nod.

"I fought a duel," he said, his tone harsh. "You'd best go back to your harp, my unreal angel, for I am scarcely fit company for you. I will bid you farewell."

He left her abruptly and for a long moment Antonia sat motionless upon her stool, looking at the door through which he had gone, icy fingers tugging at her heart. Her eyes were wide and tearless, yet her very soul wept within her. Something precious had been within her grasp and now it was lost for ever—dispelled by her own distrustful tongue. Why had she had to speak of that duel? Yet could she have made herself keep silent when it was uppermost in her mind?

She rose wearily to her feet and the harp gave a melancholy ripple of protest as she brushed past it. Clarissa's spiteful comments were true. Justin had admitted that he had fought a duel. He had almost killed the man with whose wife he had formed a scandalous relationship.

With dragging feet, Antonia went up to her own room and stood, hands tight-clenched, staring from the window. The time for hopeful fantasy was over. How

could she have ever dared to imagine that she might share a happy future with Justin Garth? Perhaps she had been living in a dream-world, where sordid unpleasant facts had no being.

"My unreal angel," Justin had named her. How quickly he had condemned her turning from him, yet how else could she have been expected to greet the news that his past, present and possibly his future, too, were tied up in some form of scandalous association? Surely Justin had not thought she would suffer his embrace, knowing all the time of the reason behind that fateful duel?

CHAPTER TEN

KIT RAWLING entered the library in search of his sister. He was wearing riding-dress and his fair hair was windblown.

"Tonia?" he said thankfully. "I was sure I would find you here!" He glanced at the empty hearth and shivered. "Are you not cold without a fire? I swear 'twas the nip of frost I felt this morning. Winter will be upon us before we are prepared for it."

Antonia rose from her chair beside the hearth, the book upon her knee falling unheeded to the carpet. Giving her brother only the briefest of looks, she smoothed down her skirts and sighed. Kit followed the direction of her gaze curiously and his eyes softened.

"Tonia—you are for ever in here, staring at the portrait of our parents," he accused gently. "What ails you these days, sister mine?"

She turned her grey eyes unwillingly towards him.

"Nothing ails me, Kit," she said wearily. "Come—what is your news? I vow you are bursting with information, love."

"You might sound a little more interested, Tonia!" retorted her brother.

With an effort Antonia smiled at him.

"Well, love? What is it?" she encouraged.

Kit took a deep breath.

"There has been a highway robbery not far from

here," he began. "Sir George Kennick's coach has been held up. I suppose he is our closest neighbour after the Bowdens, although we do not see much of him. He was on his way home from London last night when his coach was halted by masked highwaymen."

Kit paused and saw the colour recede from his sister's cheeks.

"Was anything of value taken?" asked Antonia, her lips stiff. Her eyes flashed to the portrait of her parents above the hearth, then back again to her brother. "Sir George is reputed to be wealthy. What was taken from him?"

Kit gave a low whistle.

"Apparently he suffered a vast loss. William Drew says Kennick had had his wife's jewels reset in London—she declared them old-fashioned. Sir George did not trust messengers and decided to bring them home himself—telling no one of his intention." Kit spread his hands and shrugged. "Well—*someone* must have known, unless the highwaymen picked on Sir George's coach by mere chance and *that* is scarcely likely. They got away with the whole of Lady Kennick's jewels. William says milady has not yet ceased to scream!"

Lady Kennick's ill temper was well known in the neighbourhood, but Kit's comment did not draw a smile to his sister's tense features.

"Kit," she said urgently. "Did Sir George see his assailants closely? C-can he describe them? O, Kit—do you think—"

She was trembling violently and did not demur when her brother made her sit down again.

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"You are as white as a bed-sheet, Tonia!" he accused. "Even if Sir George *did* give a description which fitted Dom Garth there's no call for you to take it to heart so." He frowned down at her thoughtfully. "I do not understand you, Tonia. One minute 'twould seem you are mad for Justin, the next for Dominic!"

Antonia's colour returned with a rush.

"I am not 'mad' for anyone, Kit," she said with dignity. "What a disgusting expression to use of your own sister!"

Kit grinned, then was sober again.

"William has been talking with Sir George's estate manager. It seems Sir George saw two men quite clearly. One sounded pretty much like Dominic— young, tall and so on, but it could have been *anyone*. We know it might have been Dom, but why should Kennick suspect that? The other man he described as older and stockily built. D'you think it could have been that Captain Starr fellow—your maid's father?"

Antonia gripped at the chair arms until her knuckles showed white.

"No, Kit! It could not have been Captain Starr! He would not rob Sir George. He—he told me he is planning a new life. He is to give up highway robbery."

"You did not believe *that*, surely?" said Kit, his tone filled with youthful cynicism.

Her heart lurched when she thought of Captain Starr's true identity. What would Kit say if she told him that the man of whom he spoke so disparagingly was his own father? She bit hard upon her lip.

"Kit—I must see Justin Garth! I *must* talk with Justin!" she muttered suddenly.

Her brother blinked at her vehemence.

"*Justin!* Did I not say it, Tonia? First 'tis Dominic, then—"

Antonia rose to her feet in a swish of skirts and clutched her brother by the arm.

"Do not play the fool, Kit," she pleaded. "You must ride over to the Bowdens for me. Please do not ask questions, love! Tell Justin I must see him." She fell silent, then added unhappily: "If he will not come, then mention the holding up of the Kennick coach. Kit—go now for this is of *vital* importance."

Seeing that his sister was truly in earnest, Kit Rawling returned to the stables to order the saddling of a fresh horse. He did not relish the idea of riding out again, but loved his sister too well to deny her. Shivering in the autumnal air, he cast an anxious glance at the ominous clouds overhead. Surely it was too early in the year for snow?

Left to herself, Antonia began to pace up and down the library. Belatedly she paused to wonder at the wisdom of sending for Justin Garth in this peremptory manner. It had seemed only natural that she should turn to him for help, but should she have given in to impulse? Their last meeting had scarcely been a happy one. Probably he would not wish to set eyes upon her again, but if Kit mentioned the robbery he would guess that it concerned Dominic. His younger cousin—if no one else—seemed close to Justin's heart.

But when Kit rode home he was alone. The Garth cousins and Mr. Bowden had not been there. Kit had been unable to contact Justin and had thought it unwise to leave a message with the inquisitive Mrs. Bowden.

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"Justin is not there?" echoed Antonia, her heart sinking at the unwelcome news. "Kit, what are we to do?"

"*Do?*" repeated her brother in amazement. "My dear sister—we did not rob the coach, so take that look of guilt from your face! As for *doing* anything—why, I am about to change my clothes and go down to the kitchen for a posset from Cook. I'm chilled to the marrow! If that is not snow up there in the clouds, then my name is not Kit Rawling!"

He left the room and Antonia sank down in a chair, her hands clenched tightly together. Was she worrying needlessly? It was fortunate that Kit judged her anxiety to be solely for the reckless Dominic Garth. How would her brother react if Captain Starr should be apprehended and his connection with Rawling House be made known?

She gave a sharp exclamation. From the way in which Kit had worded his information it would appear that William Drew might possibly have realised that Sir George's description of the young highwayman fitted Dominic. Frantically she searched her thoughts. She had rejected William even before he had made her a proper offer. His feelings had most definitely been injured. On that same occasion he had mentioned seeing blackberry juice upon Justin's hand. He had seen that she could not deny having met Justin in the woods.

She pressed her hands to her throbbing temples, trying to put order into her racing thoughts. Could William Drew feel that he had any real cause to be jealous of Justin Garth—of her *regard* for Justin?

Might he, upon spiteful impulse, seek to cause trouble for Justin through the lawless Dominic?

"No!" she breathed aloud. "I have known William too long to think so ill of him."

Would she see Justin soon? Only with him could she discuss this highway robbery and its implications. She shivered, remembering once more all she had heard of the hanging and gibbeting of convicted highwaymen. This horrid fate must not be reserved for the heedless, adventure-seeking Dominic, whose appearance was so much like that of his elder cousin. Nor must Captain Starr end his life in this manner. She caught her breath in horror as she recalled the duel. Justin also might be in danger of suffering drastic punishment! He had admitted to the fact of the duel on their last meeting. If the wronged husband should die and Justin be apprehended, what would be his fate? She was hazy as to the laws concerning duelling, but Clarissa had said that Justin must flee the country if the man died. Could it be that the threat of untimely death hung over Justin Garth?

Fleetingly she paused to wonder about the woman who had attracted Justin into the remarkable folly of scandalous behaviour culminating in a duel. Was she beautiful, fashionable, sophisticated?

Antonia knew that her own looks were not out of the common way. *She* did not fit the conventional pattern of beauty. True, her features were regular and her figure passable, but this did not add up to beauty. Yet despite this, Justin *had* been attracted to her—before she had killed all feeling by her lack of tact and trust, she reminded herself.

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Perhaps Kit should, after all, have left a message for Justin on his return? Mrs. Bowden's curiosity would have been a small price to pay for the satisfaction of discussing her fears with Justin.

With an exclamation, Antonia rose to her feet. No good could come from sitting here enveloped in useless anxiety. Kit had said it was cold outside today with the threat of early snow. She would wrap up warmly and take a brisk walk out of doors. So much concentrated thought and lack of physical effort were combining to give her the beginnings of a sick headache. Fresh air was just what she required!

It was colder by far out in the grounds than Antonia had anticipated, and she held her thick woollen country cloak securely about her, wondering if a walk were really advisable.

"I will go a short way and then turn back," she resolved beneath her breath.

Leaves crunched under her feet, their autumnal brightness dulled to a uniform brown. Some of the trees were almost leafless now, she noted. As usual the chestnuts had been the first to shed their foliage, whilst the sycamores still clung tenaciously to theirs. The banked clouds in hues of heavy purplish yellow did indeed suggest that snow might not be far away. With a feeling of shock, Antonia realised that winter had crept into the countryside almost overnight. If it snowed at all, at least it would melt away quickly, she thought with hopeful optimism. Why—it was only the end of October!

Beginning to shiver as the cold air penetrated the thick folds of her heavy cloak, she made her way round

to the rear of the house, intending to look in at the stables before she went indoors. In declining to join riding-parties in recent weeks she had quite neglected her horse. She knew that the coachman, Gilchrist, would have more than compensated the beast for her lack of interest, but wished she had brought an apple by way of atonement. Thinking of Gilchrist reminded her of the night of the holding up of the coach in which she was a passenger. Captain Starr and Dominic Garth had been the highwaymen on this occasion. Could it be that this same pair had conspired to rob Sir George Ken-nick, despite Captain Starr's declaration that he intended to start a new life?

The kitchen-gardens were bare now, save for the plentiful herbs and the evergreen bushes shielding the empty vegetable patches. Antonia was about to cross the path which linked the garden with the walled stableyard when she heard voices. If one voice had not definitely been that of her maid Betsy, she might have proceeded without giving the matter a second thought.

Hearing Betsy speak in a muffled undertone, reminded her vividly of that other time in Cranworth Wood when Justin Garth had obliged her to hide and eavesdrop on her maid's conversation.

Who was Betsy's companion today? Surely Dominic had not ridden over with secret letters for her maid to deliver? But, no—Dominic, together with Justin and Mr. Bowden, was away. Kit had just informed her of this fact.

Consumed with curiosity, Antonia edged nearer to the stableyard wall. Betsy and her unknown companion must be standing upon the cobbles just behind this wall

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because their voices, though low, were audible to the tense listener.

"—according to plan, my lass!" she heard a harsh masculine voice state, "You should have seen 'em, Bet! 'Tis the best haul yet!"

Antonia stiffened and strained her ears, determined to miss nothing of what appeared to be a vitally important conversation. She did not hesitate to think of what use she might put the conversation.

"When is the next time planned for, Jed?" she heard Betsy enquire in eager tones. "I've heard her fat old ladyship was in a proper state! Serve her right, too!"

Antonia was in no doubt that the Kennick robbery was being discussed. She stood silently listening, unaware of the icy blast of wind beginning to blow or of the ominous darkening of the clouds. Betsy's young voice was completely callous and devoid of remorse. How had she ever thought her maid could be anything but a devious little schemer? With a start, she realised that she had missed the words of the man called Jed, for Betsy was clearly responding to a remark he had just made.

"Are you sure he'll help us this time, Jed?" she was muttering doubtfully. "I've a feeling our fine friend is thinking of backing out on us."

Jed's laugh was low and ugly.

"Back out on us, Bet? Not if he knows what's good for him. I've enough on him to set a noose around his neck any time I choose! He'll give all t'help that's needed, that one!"

"When, Jed?" demanded Betsy impatiently. "When will it be?"

"Never you mind, young Bet!" said Jed harshly.

"Just be at t'tavern tomorrow night at ten. You'll find out then. Now—in wi' you, lass, and see yon fine mistress suspects naught. You'll not let her catch you listening at t'door again, if you know what's good for you!"

"No, Jed! I'll be careful!"

Betsy's voice was both sulky and fearful and Antonia's curiosity as to the identity of the gruff-voiced Jed grew apace. She shrank against the cold stone of the wall, thankful that the dark evergreen leaves of a laurel bush partly shielded her from view as Jed strode out of the stableyard.

She was too intent that he should not observe her to note more than a stocky, broad-shouldered figure of less than average height. She kept quite still until all sound of the man's footsteps had gone.

Instead of entering the stableyard as she had intended, she slipped back round the main building and went into the house by the front door. Physically chilled but inwardly afire with excited speculation, she pondered on how best she might use the information she had just acquired.

* * *

"You wished to see me, Antonia?" asked Justin Garth, his tone completely devoid of expression.

Antonia shot him a quick half-frightened look and nodded.

"I—I must speak with you," she agreed. "Please come into the library. A fire has been lit today so that I may read in comfort. We shall not be interrupted."

Justin left his hat and heavy riding-coat in the care of an inquisitive-eyed maidservant and followed Antonia silently into the library.

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Antonia was aware that the whole household would soon know that she had sought to speak privately with Justin, but was past caring about the rules of propriety. Her aunt had taken to her bed with a cold in the head and Clarissa was with her in her room, so they would not walk into the library at any moment. Kit, of course, was aware that Justin had come and could be trusted to leave the visitor alone with his sister for a time at least.

Antonia sat down beside the glowing hearth, outwardly composed although her heart was thudding unsteadily. It seemed that Mrs. Bowden had told Justin that Kit had ridden in search of him. Justin had come over to Rawling House, only to discover that it was Antonia, not Kit, who wished to see him.

"Please sit down," she begged him, then added in a whisper: "You must forget anything which has happened between us, for this concerns your cousin Dominic and—and Captain Starr. Had it not been urgent I should not have sent Kit to ask you to come."

Justin Garth sat down obediently, his intent gaze never leaving her flushed cheeks. Antonia took a deep breath, stared into the dancing flames and began in a rush of words.

"Kit says Sir George Kennick described the highwaymen who took his wife's jewels. One description fits Dominic and—and William Drew knows this. He might cause trouble in order to spite you."

She paused for breath and glanced at her silent companion. Justin's eyes were very blue in the reflected light of the flames.

"Why should Mr. Drew feel he must spite me?" he

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enquired, appearing to ignore the major part of what she had just told him.

Antonia's colour rose.

"That is not important now," she hurried on. "There is more! Please listen well."

She went on to speak of the conversation between the man Jed and her maid Betsy, the highwayman's daughter.

"They talked of a man who has helped them before," she said. "This Jed was certain that he will help him again. I am sure that another robbery is being planned."

"Did they name this man?" queried Justin quietly.

Antonia shook her head.

"No—but it must be either Captain Starr or your Cousin Dominic, for Jed said he knew enough to have the man hanged. Oh, Justin, you must *do* something!" she finished impulsively.

He smiled somewhat bitterly at this.

"'Twould seem you have a little faith in me after all, my angelic Antonia," he murmured.

"Justin! Please be serious," she implored him, rising to her feet. "Neither Captain Starr nor Dominic must hang."

Justin rose also and took a step towards her. He frowned as she flinched from him.

"Your concern for that young idiot Dom is very laudable, yet why must you trouble yourself with this Captain Starr, for he is a hardened criminal? No doubt he deserves a harsh fate far more than foolhardy Cousin Dominic!"

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Antonia's eyes flashed upwards to the portrait of her parents and Justin Garth followed the direction of her gaze.

"Your parents, yourself and brother Kit?" he queried, frowning anew at the hunted expression on her face.

She nodded miserably.

"Justin—Captain Starr told me he is Kit's father. That is why I agreed to have his daughter here. I thought that I was buying his silence. I wanted to keep this intelligence from poor Kit."

Justin looked at her steadily.

"I knew there was something troubling you, my dear," he said, his voice softening. "Come, will you not tell me the whole of it?"

Antonia sank down once more in her chair and gave a weary nod.

"'Tis mostly guesswork," she confessed. "This—this highwayman came into my life deliberately. With the help of your cousin he held up our coach when we returned home from a visit to the Bowdens in the summer."

Justin nodded and moved to stand behind her chair so that she could not read his expression.

"That was the evening when I first saw you, Antonia, when I first heard you sing," he murmured. "Go on, my dear."

"Captain Starr said he had a favour to ask of me," she said, her voice almost inaudible. "I learned that he was Kit's father and that he had a young daughter, Betsy. He appeared to be worried about her way of life and suggested that if I would give her a home, then *he*

would be silent about Kit's right to inherit Rawling House!"

She felt Justin's hand touch her shoulder.

"You agreed to this unfair bargain, Antonia?" he asked her gently. She nodded miserably.

"What alternative had I? I love my brother and could not bear to see his life ruined by scandal. I thought the matter would end there. But Betsy is not quite all she seems. Even Captain Starr cannot know her properly. He declared he is giving up his profession and soon will take his daughter away and make a proper home for her. I do not think she will agree to this plan, Justin, for she is involved in the Kennick robbery—even if her father is not."

Justin Garth moved back into her view and stretched out his hands to the fire.

"You have not completely explained your deep concern for this highwayman's well-being," he told her.

Antonia gave a sudden shiver, her eyes once more on the family portrait above the hearth.

"I have always believed my father to be dead," she whispered. "Mama said he was killed in the war with France in 1760. Why should I have questioned it?"

"'Twould appear you question it now," murmured Justin, stepping back to view the portrait more closely.

She was silent for a moment, then continued haltingly:

"Justin—I think my father is still alive! I think Betsy is not the only highwayman's daughter! For some reason he pretended to be dead and assumed the disguise of a highwayman. I am convinced that I cannot be wrong!"

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She put her face into her hands. For the first time she had allowed her wild suspicion to be formed in words.

"If you are going to weep," said Justin, his tone matter-of-fact, "then you had better weep upon me, Antonia."

He had seated himself upon the arm of her chair and even as he spoke was drawing her head to rest against him. She did not repulse his action, merely gave a sigh of mixed relief and weariness.

"Captain Starr is much the height and build of my father in that portrait," she murmured, her cheek against the cool satin of Justin's waistcoat. "When I last spoke with him I was a trifle upset. He attempted to comfort me and used a childish pet-name I have never heard since my father went away. I was only young when he left for France but I do remember him a little. If he is Captain Starr I cannot wish him ill."

She felt Justin's finger flick her cheek and looked up to find that his blue eyes, serious now in expression, were very close to hers.

"What did he call you?" he asked quietly.

"Toni-love," she admitted. "It was his special name for me. I—I was but a child," she explained excusingly.

Justin stood up suddenly, drawing her to her feet also.

"Well, Toni-love," he said half-mockingly, "'twould seem we must save Captain Starr from the gallows—if only to set your mind at rest."

Forgetting their last meeting, she clutched at him eagerly.

"Oh, Justin! I knew you would help me," she said gratefully. "I can trust no one but you."

Carefully he freed himself and took a backward step. Her cheeks grew hot with shame as she realised what she had said. She spoke so lightly of trust, yet had shown none in him in the matter of that fateful duel.

"Perhaps I should follow Betsy tonight?" she suggested quickly, pretending sudden desperate interest in folding a pleat in the skirt of her gown. "We shall not learn of the plan involving Captain Starr—or Dominic—unless someone goes after Betsy tonight. I have no idea of the whereabouts of this tavern, you see."

She gasped in sudden pain as Justin Garth gripped her by the shoulders.

"You will *not* follow Betsy, my angelic idiot," he declared, his blue eyes exasperated. "I shall follow the girl myself. If there is anything to be learned, then I must be at this tavern tonight. Did you imagine for a moment that I would allow you to set out in the dark, heading for some low ale-house? Really, Antonia, you are past belief!"

She gazed up at him.

"It may be dangerous," she whispered. "Justin—you will be careful? Jed seemed an ugly-natured character, for even Betsy was a little afraid of him. If he is planning another robbery he will not take kindly to eavesdroppers."

Justin shook her lightly.

"Yet knowing the danger, you would have followed the girl yourself?" he murmured. "I would not have believed it of my angelic harpist!" With a sudden sigh, he bent to brush his lips against her forehead. "Do not frown so, my dear. Perhaps the time of explanation is nearer than we think!"

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With this obscure remark he took his leave of her. She was curiously heartened by his manner despite the fact that he had repulsed her gesture of gratitude. Could the explanation of which he spoke have any bearing upon himself and the duel? Could it be that the future might not be black and empty for her after all?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE night was bitterly cold and snowflakes floated sparsely down, to melt the instant they alighted upon the ruts of the country lane. Moonlight and starlight shone intermittently, only to be obscured by cloud, leaving the countryside even darker than before.

Justin Garth followed in the wake of the cloaked figure of Betsy, the highwayman's daughter. Despite his height he moved lightly upon his feet, determined that his quarry should not learn of his pursuit. He had stabled his horse in an empty stall of the Rawling stables and then had waited with controlled impatience for Antonia's young maid to set out. She had not appeared until the stable-clock was striking half-past nine. Antonia had told him that the girl's appointment with the unknown Jed was for ten o'clock. As she had allowed herself but a half-hour in which to accomplish the journey, the tavern could not be at any great distance from Rawling House. Justin frowned thoughtfully as he trudged on silent feet in Betsy's wake. Would anything of value be gained tonight? Would he learn anything which might help to set Antonia's mind at rest?

He knew that he could not have refused to follow Betsy. Had he scoffed at the likelihood of gaining useful information in this way, then Antonia Rawling would have set out in his stead. There was a steely

determination beneath her outward calm docility, he thought reflectively. Where her brother Kit and this man she believed to be her father were concerned, she would not be gainsaid. She had had the manner of a mother in fierce protection of her young—an absurd comparison yet somehow fitting, thought Justin as he stood in the shadow of a tree. Betsy had halted not far ahead of him and he stood motionless, waiting for the girl to proceed.

Antonia's loyalty—once earned—would be no mean quality. Justin's expression was wry as he considered what must be her opinion of him. Clarissa Wade could only have learned of that ill-fated duel through one or both of the Bowden sisters. Had he been foolish to hide himself in the country with Dominic? Did he really hope to achieve anything at all by shielding his ungrateful cousin? Dom had ever been headstrong as a child and the years had not improved him in that respect. He did not deceive himself that his young cousin would pay him the slightest heed however great the danger might become. If he had left Dom to ruin his life at his own headlong pace, circumstances would be vastly different at present.

Yes, thought Justin, though without self-congratulation, as he moved off after the vanishing Betsy. But for his unwelcomed interference Dominic Garth might well be up for public display at some crossroad gibbet by now. Why had not Dom channelled his mulish determination to lead his own life into less dramatic and far-reaching ways?

Justin sighed once more and thought of Antonia Rawling's predicament. With or without his involve-

ment, her position would have been the same. But for his grim determination to keep an eye upon his cousin and restrain his activities for a time beneath the roof of the obliging Mr. Bowden, he might never have met Antonia. It was a sobering thought!

Betsy seemed to have no clear idea of her destination, which seemed a trifle odd if this tavern had once been her home. She would move along rapidly, then pause as if at a loss. She appeared to be skirting the edge of Cranworth Wood at its furthest point from the spot where Antonia had once picked blackberries.

Justin's eyes stared intently at the darkness ahead. Perhaps, after all, the girl *had* known which direction to take, for looming up at the further side of the wood was a squat, darkened building of some kind or other. Justin stepped back hastily into the shadows as Betsy cast a quick look across her shoulder before entering the building.

There was no sign of life from the tavern and the night seemed blacker even than before. Justin had an unworthy desire to retrace his steps, collect his horse and ride off back to take his night's rest beneath his host's roof. He grinned to himself. It would seem he was too fond of his own comforts to be of the stuff of which heroes were made. Then he stiffened his resolve. In this same position, Antonia Rawling would not now be deciding to return home! No—she would be debating on how best to approach the tavern, how to gain entrance in order to obtain the desired information. He marvelled anew at the unexpected depths of her character. From the very first he had singled her out as being completely different from any other young woman of

his acquaintance. Just how "different" only time had revealed to him! He had found himself to be studying her in great detail at their every meeting. Her early avoidance of him and her unhappy confusion when conversation became a necessity, had worried him only temporarily. Her manner had suggested that she knew herself to be under observation—possibly by that foolish aunt of hers, Mrs. Wade. It was not difficult to guess that someone—once again Mrs. Wade's name had sprung to mind—had impressed her with the desirability of charming him into wedlock. Justin grinned to himself. Although almost entirely without conceit, he knew that his looks and personal bearing were of a type classed as irresistible to many young females. A great part of his adult life had been spent in avoiding the ploys of match-making Mamas.

Antonia Rawlings' reluctance to play her intended part had both touched and amused him, for he had judged from the first that her instinct was to like him in spite of herself. Only by acting against instinct had she been able to retain her integrity. Poor Antonia! If only she could have guessed the conclusions he had reached about her on only a second meeting, she would have realised that her evasions had never been necessary!

It had been obvious that Clarissa Wade's doting mother had once hoped—nay, hoped still—to secure the reckless Dominic as husband for her beloved child. Justin had no great opinion of his cousin's character and even less of the bird-witted Clarissa. At least Dom could be trusted not to make *her* an offer. There was little point in anticipating trouble on that score.

Justin had been leaning back against the rough bark of a sturdy oak. Delicate insubstantial snowflakes

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drifted down upon his coat to melt immediately. He frowned. He was becoming decidedly wet. Then suddenly he forgot his regrettable concern for his own comfort.

A light was showing at what must be a window of the tavern. With a subdued exclamation, Justin moved out of the oak tree's shadow and began warily to close the gap between himself and the tavern. Perhaps he might see and hear that which he sought, if only he could get near enough to the window.

He was within a few paces of reaching this goal when he heard a soft movement behind him. Whipping round his head, he saw a masked face and an upraised arm in the flickering light from the unshaded window.

"So Bet was right! She *was* followed tonight!" rasped a harsh voice.

The arm descended with some considerable force and Justin's knees buckled as he pitched forward to strike his head upon the tavern wall. His last conscious thought was: Antonia would have fared better at this night's work.

Then throbbing blackness wrapped about him and all was still.

* * *

When Justin Garth regained consciousness at last he found that he was lying, securely bound, upon the bare, dusty boards of a darkened room. The air smelt musty. Even the effort of wrinkling his nose to reach this minor conclusion caused blinding pain to possess him. He groaned and made a vain attempt to sit up. Whoever had tied him up had been no stranger to the art of rendering movement impossible.

He realised that he must be inside the tavern and lay

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still, straining his ears for any sign that he was not entirely alone. Complete silence greeted him. He half-considered calling out, then thought better of it. His ill-treated skull would not take kindly to such an action. Perhaps also, it would be wiser for him to remain silent until he had recovered a little. If he should shout he might only draw back his attacker and receive more of the same treatment, a thought he did not relish, bound as he was. He must lie still and comfort himself with the knowledge that Betsy and her companions had not wished him dead. He was a fool not to have known that the girl had heard him following her. Her uncertain halting demeanor should have told him that. She must have gone into the tavern to voice her fears to her fellow-plotters. It all seemed so obvious now. Someone—possibly Jed—had made his exit by another door in order to render the intended eavesdropper harmless.

How long was he to be kept prisoner here? Justin's thoughts raced ahead: Only Antonia Rawling knew that he had set out to follow her maid. Antonia had already declared that she did not know the whereabouts of this tavern. If she should become alarmed by his failure to return, what action would she take? He knew that only if it were completely necessary would she take Kit into her confidence. Would it occur to her to seek out Dominic and beg his aid? Perhaps she would turn to her brother's estate manager, William Drew?

Justin groaned again. He had done nothing to aid Antonia in her anxiety. Indeed, if she cared anything at all for him, his carelessness in allowing himself to be captured must only serve to add to her troubles.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ANTONIA rose early, dressed with haste and made her way down to the stables. One of the grooms was sweeping out the yard and he paused to touch his cap and bid her good morning. Giving him an automatic smile, she entered the stables. As she had anticipated, Justin Garth's black horse was there in a stall, eating an unconcerned breakfast of oats.

She leaned uncertainly on the half-door of the stall and watched the magnificent animal. Justin had not returned last night! She had known of his intention to follow Betsy on foot. Indeed, he had stabled his mount here at her own suggestion.

"'Morning, Miss Tonia!" a voice greeted her cheerfully, jerking her out of her reverie.

She turned her head to see Gilchrist the coachman approaching.

"'Fine beast, yon,'" he approved, nodding his head at the animal. "'Mr. Justin's horse, I reckon?" he went on, his eyes filled with benign curiosity.

"'Y-yes, it is Mr. Garth's horse,'" she admitted. "'Have you seen him this morning at all, Gilchrist?"

The elderly coachman looked at her shrewdly. He knew his young mistress well.

"'Did you expect him back afore now?" he asked cheerfully. "'Don't you go worrying your head about

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Mr. Justin. Reckon he can take care of himself, that one."

Antonia flushed and turned back to look at the horse.

"I—I said he could use the stable last night," she explained. "But his horse is here still."

"He's a fine young gentleman," approved Gilchrist, a twinkle in his faded eyes. "Will we be seeing more of him in t'future, Miss Tonia?"

Her colour deepened as she turned anxious eyes to the kindly coachman.

"He should be back by now, Gilchrist," she whispered. "He may be in trouble. If anything has happened to him it will be my fault."

Gilchrist put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Nay, don't you take on so, lass," he said. "'Tis unlike you to fret wi'out cause. Come—what's amiss? You can tell old Gilchrist, for sure."

Antonia stared at him for a long, considering moment, then she nodded.

"Perhaps you can help to set my mind at rest," she said slowly. "Gilchrist—do you know of a tavern or ale-house not far from here?"

The elderly coachman frowned and rubbed his chin with a horny hand.

"How far from here, lass?" he asked doubtfully. "Reckon there'll be several—not that *I've* ever given 'em my custom!"

Antonia tried to smile. She had forgotten Gilchrist's almost fanatical avoidance of intoxicating beverages.

"The place I seek must be within a half-hour's walk of here," she explained.

Gilchrist's brow wrinkled in thought, then it cleared and he gave a nod.

" 'Twill be Jed Filey's ale-house, you're meaning," he said. His frown returned as he added, " 'Tis said to be the haunt of highwaymen. Mr. Justin's never gone traipsing off there in t'dark, has he?"

"I—I can't explain, Gilchrist," she said desperately. "If you will give me the direction of the place, then I—"

"Nay, don't you have any ideas of going off there on your own, Miss Tonia!" said the coachman in alarm, his eyes upon her shrewdly. "Jed Filey's an ugly customer to cross. Reckon you'd just better wait here 'til Mr. Justin comes, lass."

"I—I thought that perhaps his cousin Dominic might wish to know where he has gone," she murmured untruthfully.

After a moment's hesitation, Gilchrist revealed details of the tavern's whereabouts, but his eyes were worried as he watched his young mistress leave the stableyard.

"Headstrong—when it suits her, that one!" he muttered to the black horse. "Seems sweet and biddable as you please, 'til she gets t'bit between her teeth!" He sighed. "Happen she'll have too much sense to do aught foolish."

Gilchrist would have been distressed if he could have known how wide of the mark was his confident supposition. Antonia had every intention of going in search of Justin, although she decided reluctantly that it would be best if she waited a while before setting out. After all,

he had not been absent long enough to give cause for undue anxiety.

She took breakfast alone in the dining-room. Clarissa never rose at this hour and her aunt was still in the grip of a cold in the head. It appeared that Kit and William Drew had eaten even earlier than she had and had departed some time ago.

Kit was truly diligent, she thought. He took the business of running his home and estate with laudable solemnity. William Drew was equally hard-working and made an admirable estate manager. Even though she had offended him, he still greeted her with a kind of guarded courtesy. She must endeavour not to upset him further, for Kit would be loath to lose his services.

Antonia ate sparingly of cold ham and bread and butter, glad that her maid, Ellen, was not present to coax her to take more nourishment. Poor Ellen had had the ill-luck to take Aunt Hetta's cold and had not yet risen from her bed. Of the younger maid, Betsy, Antonia had had no glimpse that morning.

She could quite well dispense with the services of a maid, except for dress occasions, and here she was with *two* of them! The plain grey gown she had chosen to wear today had no intricate fastenings and caused no difficulty in the donning. She drank more tea but crumbled the remainder of a piece of bread and butter upon her plate. She had no appetite for food at all.

If only Justin would come!

She left the table and went to peer out from the window at the wet garden. It must have either rained or snowed a little last night, she thought disinterestedly. If Justin did not arrive soon, then she must ride in search

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of this low-sounding tavern, regardless of both possible danger and Gilchrist's open disapproval.

Leaving the dining-room, she began to cross the hall, just as a maid opened the outer door to admit an early caller.

"Justin!" breathed Antonia. "Oh—*Justin!* You are safe, after all!"

She lifted her skirts and ran across the hall to grasp the man by his arm. As he turned to face her, his expression one of amusement, her joy faded and her hands dropped to her sides.

"Oh, it is *you*, Dominic!" she murmured.

"Yes, unfortunately 'tis only I!" retorted the younger Garth cousin. "So the rapturous greeting was not for me?"

His looks were disturbingly akin to Justin's but lacked firmness and maturity, although the blue eyes were amazingly like those of his cousin.

Dominic Garth gave his hat to the openly smiling maidservant and dismissed her with an airy wave of his hand. Noting Antonia's half-bemused state, he grinned, took her by the elbow and led her into the library.

"Did you expect Justin to call?" he murmured. "I am afraid I am ignorant of his whereabouts. I have not seen him since yesterday." He took a step towards her and grinned once more. "Will I not do instead, Antonia?"

She shook her head, paying little heed to his bantering manner. A glint entered his blue eyes and before she knew what he was about, he had grasped her by the shoulders and was kissing her lightly upon the lips.

With a gasp of shock, Antonia freed herself and

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raised a hand to deal a well-earned slap at Dominic's face. He caught her wrist to stay her intention, then gave a sudden exclamation, the teasing look leaving his face.

"Tears, Antonia?" he said gently. "I am sorry to upset you so. I assure you that is not a normal reaction to my embraces—"

"Be quiet, Dominic!" begged Antonia, mopping at her cheeks with the back of her hand. "This is not a jest. Justin may be in danger. It is my fault—and yours, too, for you are a sad burden on him."

Dominic's face froze into a handsome mask.

"So my dear cousin has discussed me with you, has he?" he began, his voice even but angry.

"No, he has *not!*" retorted Antonia. "Do give a thought to someone other than yourself." She caught at his sleeve. "Dominic—where is Captain Starr? If you will not help, then perhaps I can ask *him*."

His blue eyes narrowed.

"D'you mean the highwayman fellow?" he murmured evasively.

She shook his arm in exasperation.

"I speak of your accomplice on the night our coach was held up," she said between her teeth. "Can you contact him for me?"

Dominic would not meet the demand in her grey eyes.

"How can it be that Justin is in danger?" he parried.

"I asked him to attempt to discover the plans of Jed and his friends," she said, watching carefully for his reaction.

She was not disappointed. Dominic Garth gave a low whistle of sheer amazement and eyed her narrowly.

"First 'tis Captain Starr and now Jed!" he murmured. "'Twould seem you are getting out of depth, Antonia—and taking sobersides Justin along with you. 'Twill be the making of him!"

She glared at him, her tears forgotten.

"Are you never serious, Dominic Garth?" she demanded tautly. "Your cousin cares greatly for your safety. Can you not show—or pretend—a little concern for *his*?"

He cast her a half-amused look.

"I cannot think what kind of nonsense Justin has been telling you," he began. "No doubt you look upon him as my protector. Let us say, he imagines himself as my guardian angel and has set himself to dog my heels, whether I like it or no." His smile vanished and he took a step towards Antonia, his attitude somewhat threatening. "Why must you concern your pretty head with highwaymen, Antonia? You will only come to grief."

Suddenly it occurred to her that Captain Starr might not have confided in Justin's cousin, after all. He was a thoroughly irritating young man and worthy of no one's confidences. If he did not know of the highwayman's connection with Rawling House, she would not make him a gift of the information.

"I must see Captain Starr," she said slowly. "He is Betsy's father and *she* is involved in unlawful activity."

Dominic eyed her speculatively, then he nodded as if convinced he need not prevaricate further.

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"He's left Yorkshire for a time," he said guardedly. "I could not get word to him—not for another week at least." He paused, then said warningly: "Antonia, you must keep clear of Jed Filey. I'd not like to see you come to harm. If my elderly cousin has seen fit to poke his nose into Jed's affairs on your account, you'll have little to thank yourself for."

She paled and put a pleading hand upon his arm.

"Dominic—is there anything you can do?" she whispered. "If you know Jed Filey, can you not—"

She broke off as a sound of indrawn breath at the library door caught her ears. Slowly she turned to see that the door was open, framing the figure of her young maid, who was standing hand to mouth with apparent shock.

"Oh!" gasped Betsy, her eyes round with disbelief and horror. "Oh—how d-did you get away?"

She backed through the door in panic, ran across the hall and slammed the door to the kitchen-quarters behind her.

Antonia turned back to Dominic.

"She thought you were Justin!" she breathed.

He shook his head decisively.

"No—more likely she thought *I* was at the tavern last night. She'd not mistake me for my cousin by daylight."

Antonia felt a thrill of fear run through her.

"Jed must have encountered Justin last night and thought he was y-you," she stammered. "No wonder Betsy was amazed to see you safe and well. Oh, Dominic! What have they done to him? I—I dare not think—"

Dominic Garth seized her roughly by the shoulders and gave her a shake.

"No hysterics!" he warned. "They've not killed him. Betsy was surprised to see me, but she did not think I was a ghost! She said: 'How did you get away' remember? 'Tis obvious my dear cousin is being kept prisoner."

"A prisoner?" she whispered. "Dominic, you must save him!"

"Dramatic, are we not?" he said, then looked ashamed when he saw the fear in her grey eyes. Clumsily he patted her shoulder. "I'll ride to the tavern," he assured her. "My horse is in the stable. I asked the grooms to leave it saddled."

"I am coming with you," said Antonia determinedly. "I can ride well enough in this gown."

He did not attempt to dissuade her. In silence they made their way to the stables, to be met by a panting Gilchrist.

"Mr. Dominic, sir!" gasped the coachman breathlessly. "Did you give leave for that Betsy-girl to make off wi' your horse? She's just ridden off as if t'demons were after her! I tried to stop her—"

Dominic's dismay would have been comical had the situation been less serious. For once he appeared to be completely at a loss. Antonia took a deep breath and assumed command.

"Gilchrist—have my horse saddled up and a mount for Mr. Garth, too. Mr. Justin is in danger! We must catch up with Betsy. If she should get to the tavern—"

Gilchrist was shouting orders to the grooms and Antonia's passionate appeal faded into silence. Several

precious minutes were wasted before she, Dominic and Gilchrist himself were able to canter out over the cobbles of the stableyard.

Dominic knew the way to the tavern well enough, but Betsy must have known a shorter route, for when the three of them reached the squat building beside the wood, they found it empty. Of Jed, Betsy, and Justin too, there was no sign. The tavern looked as if a whirlwind had laid it waste. No doubt the occupants had departed in extreme haste, grabbing at essentials as they went. In a musty loft beneath the eaves, Dominic found that the dust upon the boards had been disturbed. He climbed slowly back down the loft-ladder to greet the tense Antonia. In his hand was a short length of rope with sawn-through ends.

"They've taken him with them," he said. "They've gone—all of them—and dear little Betsy has taken my horse *and* my new saddle!" he added savagely.

"Your horse!" cried Antonia, unable to credit his selfishness. "What does a *horse* matter? Dominic—they have taken your cousin! Justin has g-gone!"

She burst into stormy tears and was instantly taken into the fatherly arms of Gilchrist, who glared at young Mr. Garth over her shaking shoulders. Only then did Dominic realise the extent of his tactlessness.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JUSTIN GARTH seethed inwardly. For two days he had been a prisoner of what he termed the "Filey Gang" and for every minute of that time he had suffered the ignomy of having his hands tied behind his back or his ankles tied together. His ankles were untied when his captors wished him to walk, but were made secure again before his hands were freed to eat the meagre fare allowed him. He was dirty and dishevelled and a stubble of beard darkened his jaw. He had spent the entire two days in alternately planning escape and inventing an unpleasant fate for Jed Filey. So far, all of his desperate thoughts had achieved nothing at all.

At the tavern he had seen the harsh-spoken Jed, the girl Betsy and one other man. After many miles of travel they had been joined by another man, making the party up to three men plus himself and Betsy. It was odd that he should consider Captain Starr's daughter as being well-disposed towards him, yet somehow he could not place her entirely upon the side of these vicious, lawless men.

On recovering consciousness in the tavern's loft, he had been paid a fleeting and apparently unsanctioned visit by Betsy. She had climbed up the loft-ladder, thrust her dark head through the aperture in the floor and stared at him from childish, sorrowful eyes.

"You shouldn't have followed me," she had mut-

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tered. "Jed didn't like it. You should've waited 'til he sent for you. 'Tis your own fault."

This odd-sounding observation had convinced Justin that he had been mistaken for his cousin. His heart sank. Dom must have been crazed to have allied himself with a man of Jed Filey's type.

He had deemed it wiser to keep his identity to himself. If Jed would strike down a fellow-conspirator without compunction, how might he treat a complete outsider to his gang?

Even young Betsy had not been immune from rough treatment at Filey's hands, for he had dragged her down the loft-ladder before she could say more. The sound of a sharp slap and then a subdued sob reached the ears of the man lying upon the dusty floor of the loft.

All had been silent for some hours after this and eventually Justin had fallen into uneasy slumber, to wake finally with an agonizing cramp in his limbs and the horrid suspicion that a mouse running across his face had been instrumental in putting an end to sleep.

He was brought a mug of sour ale and a dry crust of bread by an undersized rat-faced man whose breath smelled of strong spirits. Rat-face had spoken not a word. He had lifted Justin's head roughly, poured the ale into his unwelcoming mouth so rapidly that he choked, and departed after pushing the crust forcefully between the prisoner's teeth.

Scarcely had Justin spat out this tasteless fare than the tavern had become filled with a variety of unidentifiable noises. He heard feet upon boarded floors, oaths shouted or muttered and a general clatter of cupboards and other furniture.

Jed Filey had appeared at the head of the loft-ladder

and without a word had seized Justin by the shoulders and heaved him bodily down into the room below.

"Are we leaving?" Justin had enquired pleasantly, wincing at his many bruises.

He had received a back-handed blow which drove his teeth into his lip and had been ordered to shut his mouth. Blood now mingled with the ale-stains upon his shirt and he judged it best to obey orders—for the moment at least.

The first stage of the flight—for flight it appeared to be—was singularly uncomfortable for the prisoner. He found himself hurled face down across the neck of a horse while Jed Filey mounted behind with a grunt. In Justin's bemused state the animal seemed oddly like the beast owned by his cousin Dominic. Surely Dom could not be a party to this abduction of his own kin?

Betsy had climbed up behind Rat-face on an ugly but powerful-looking black nag. She was whimpering to herself and appeared to be clutching a bundle of belongings to her breast.

The tavern was soon far behind them. A rest was made in the shelter of a wood at about noon. Only the height of the pale wintry sun hinted at the time of day. Justin was cast carelessly down upon a clump of damp, withered bracken and was ignored whilst his captors ate a meal of sorts. He shivered, for his coat was of thin material. His heavy riding-coat had been appropriated by Jed Filey, his broad shoulders threatening to burst the stitches at the seams.

Betsy had muttered something to Jed and had brought a piece of bread over to the neglected prisoner. She bent over him, keeping her back to Jed.

"You should've told me you weren't Mr.

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Dominic," she whispered as she made a play of feeding him with the bread, "I thought 'twas *him*. I never wanted *you* hurt and there's b-blood on you already!"

"Hold your tongue, Bet!" shouted Jed Filey, looking across suspiciously. "Come on—get your things together. We're off! If our fine friend's not eaten enough then 'tis all one to me!"

The journey had been resumed and the two overburdened horses had been urged to the limit, halting only when darkness fell, at what appeared to be another wayside inn. Justin had little opportunity to judge his new surroundings for he had been dragged into an empty, windowless room and locked in. Eventually a short fat man with a protruding stomach and heavy, fleshy features had entered the room. He had untied Justin's wrists, put down a mug of ale and a platter of beef and bread upon the rough floor, then departed in silence.

Ignoring the food, Justin set to work upon the knots in the rope around his ankles and had loosened none, only succeeded in breaking his fingernails, before Rat-face entered. The undersized man eyed the untouched food and grunted:

"Not good enough for your lordship, then?"

Before the man could remove the plate, Justin grabbed at it and began to eat with a complete absence of good manners. The meat and bread seemed vastly appetising now that he was in danger of being deprived of them. He took a deep drink from the mug and heard Rat-face grunt again as he left the room.

Scarcely had Justin finished the simple meal and returned to the knots, than the fat-stomached man shuf-

fled in to remove the plate and to re-tie his wrists. At least the fellow had the humanity to tie them in front instead of behind the prisoner's back.

"Thank you," said Justin sardonically. "Tell me—how long am I to be kept here?"

He quelled an unseemly desire to spit into the fleshy unfriendly features. It was somewhat disturbing to realise that he was not quite as civilised as he had believed. He had never felt less like a model of gentlemanly behaviour than he did at this moment.

He received no answer. The man grunted with exertion as he secured the final knot. He rose heavily from where he had been crouched over Justin's seated figure, then shook his head with slow deliberation. Pointing a thick finger to his lips, he shook his head again and left the room with an ungainly tread.

"Dumb?" muttered Justin doubtfully.

As no one had thought to provide him with a chair he was sitting uncomfortably upon the floor. He shuffled himself backwards on the seat of his breeches until his shoulders rested against the wall. At least he had been fed, he thought, attempting to be philosophical. Surely they would not trouble to give him food if they intended to kill him?

The idea of meeting death in this dismal place did not appeal to him one jot. He tried to concentrate on the situation he had left behind—how many nights ago?—at Rawling House.

Antonia would not think his absence was deliberate. That, at least, was a consolation. He had achieved nothing by following her maid, Betsy. He had prided himself on his soft-footed pursuit when all the while the

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girl must have been aware of his presence. It was odd that she had thought him to be Dominic—that Jed Filey had imagined it was *Dominic* he had struck upon the head. Perhaps, after all, Cousin Dom was a very amateur highwayman and had been used by the vicious Jed. Antonia had told him what she had overheard from Jed and Betsy in the stableyard. It would seem that Dominic had indeed been used, for Antonia had said that Jed declared he knew enough to have him hanged. Dom must have grown less eager to assist in armed robbery, thought his cousin grimly. Jed had been prepared to use the weapon of his knowledge to coerce further help.

Betsy had been both frightened and upset when she learned that the prisoner was the elder Garth cousin. She did not appear to hold him in dislike. Perhaps she might be willing to aid his escape, mused Justin. Then he frowned, moving his tongue gently across his bitten lip. It was evident that she went in extreme fear of the callous Jed. She would never set the prisoner free and risk possible injury. He must not ask it of the child, for it would be unfair of him.

He stared unseeingly across the dark room. Cracks of light showed where walls and roof met unevenly in places. Had he allowed his imagination too free a rein when he compared Jed Filey's mount to Dominic's own horse? No—wait! The saddle had been new and of an intricate design. It was Dom's horse, he pondered in bewilderment. Exactly how had Cousin Dom been persuaded to part with something he held dear? Jed Filey must have stolen the beast. No other explanation was feasible. Dominic's fury would know no bounds!

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Justin's head was beginning to ache abominably and he longed futilely for a pillow on which to rest it. Instead he was obliged to make do with the roughness of the wall.

The cracks of light had gone and somewhere outside an owl hooted eerily. Scrabbling noises better left unidentified sounded within the walls of his prison. With a weary sigh, Justin tried to force himself to sleep. He would need to have all his wits about him to deal with the problems morning would bring.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Just think, Tonia!" exclaimed Clarissa Wade excitedly. "Dominic's horse has been stolen! Patricia says he is *livid* with anger. I vow he thinks more of that brute than of *people*!" She grimaced at her unresponsive cousin. "I am beginning to think that Dominic Garth is too unreliable to make a good husband. But for his prospects of a fortune and a title, I am sure Mama would agree with me!"

Antonia stared dully at the younger girl, wishing she would leave the room and find someone else to tease with her irritating chatter. In her way, she was as childishly annoying as Dominic Garth himself. They were a better matched pair than had at first been apparent. Perhaps they were deserving of each other, she thought with uncharacteristic sourness. She had been bitterly disappointed in the conduct and character of the younger Mr. Garth.

Both Antonia and Gilchrist had allowed themselves to be persuaded by Dominic that strict silence about the circumstances of his cousin's disappearance was vital. Antonia and her disapproving coachman had been in favour of approaching the law-force in York, with the demand that a full-scale search be made for the abducted man. Reluctantly they had agreed that such a move might endanger Justin's life.

"I will find him! I will set out this very day,"

Dominic had promised confidently. "I have some idea of Jed Filey's contacts and hideouts, although he never completely trusted me. I will do my utmost to seek out Captain Starr, too, and enlist his aid. He is not a bad sort of fellow! He will persuade Jed to set Justin free. I am convinced of it."

Unwillingly, Antonia tried to forget Dominic's declarations. With an effort she shut out her thoughts and forced herself to listen to Clarissa's excited narrative.

"Patricia says Dominic has some notion of the identity of the horse-thief and has set out upon a borrowed mount to apprehend the fellow *himself*! She says he was vastly annoyed to lose a new saddle." Clarissa paused to draw breath. "I am not sure whether the horse was taken from the Bowden stables or not. Patsy did not seem to know any details when I asked her that. Mr. Bowden says we can only *expect* to be robbed, when there is no efficient law-force in the country," she continued with the air of a child reciting a proudly learned lesson. "You see, Patricia's Papa can remember the days of Blind John Fielding's horse-patrol. He says they were doing a fine job in dealing with robbers and highwaymen and the like, but the Government made the patrol disband after a short time. 'Twas too expensive."

Despite her preoccupation, Antonia stared at her cousin with awed respect. It was quite unlike Clarissa to hold forth at length upon a subject weightier than the trends of latest fashion!

"You would not think anyone would dare to go against the law," pursued Clarissa, flattered by Antonia's look of rapt attention. "Mr. Bowden says

that more than a hundred and fifty crimes are punishable by *death!* Think of that, Tonia—just think of it! *Death!*”

Antonia thought of it and blanched, sick fear clutching at her stomach. With Justin Garth still missing, death was not an easy state to contemplate. Yet she was convinced that he was still alive. Surely he could not have died at Jed Filey's hands? Her every instinct urged her to believe that he lived, but Clarissa's absorption with the subject of death threatened to undermine her hard-won composure. She had slept badly since Justin's disappearance and her grey eyes were dark-ringed with weariness. Even her beloved music had failed to console her.

She had been seated at her harp when Clarissa burst in the room with news of the stealing of Dominic's horse. In sudden, heart-wrung desperation, Antonia interrupted the flow of her cousin's disturbing conversation with a series of discordant ripples of the harp-strings. The unmelodic notes echoed harshly about the room and Clarissa winced.

“Really, Tonia!” she said severely. “You are most impolite today. I had not finished speaking.” She cast the older girl a sly look. “No doubt you are annoyed because Justin Garth has left again. I vow he is as unreliable as Dominic! You do not need to try to charm him now,” she went on spitefully, “for 'tis no longer necessary that Dominic be kept in the neighbourhood. Mama will understand if you cease your act of yearning after Justin!” Her expression altered and she sighed. “If only Mama could afford to give me a season in London! I am assured I would have half a dozen offers

in no time at all." Noting her cousin's wooden expression, her voice sharpened. "There's no call for you to look so superior, Tonia Rawling! *You* have not caught a husband either and you'll never get Justin Garth to make an offer, so do not imagine you will!"

Antonia bit hard upon her lip to stem angry words which would only end in weeping. Her fingers flew across the strings in wild abandon, deeply offending her musical sense.

Clarissa clapped her hands to her ears and backed towards the door.

"If that is a new melody, then it does not say anything for your ability to choose a good tune!" she retorted.

The door slammed behind the younger girl and Antonia stilled the clamouring strings with her palms. She rested her throbbing brow against the smooth gilded frame of the harp and closed her eyes to shut out her immediate surroundings.

She willed herself to think of Justin Garth as she had last seen him, not as her overworked imagination pictured him in his captivity.

Despite her decision not to be swayed by his handsome looks; despite the upsetting knowledge that Aunt Hetta had expected her to charm him; despite *everything*—she had fallen headlong in love for the first time in her life and was powerless to do anything about it. If only she had never spoken to Justin of that scandalous duel. If he should die at Jed Filey's hands, he would do so thinking that she had not trusted him sufficiently to judge the duel as unimportant.

"*I must* be able to make up for my lack of trust! Let

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him be safe," she prayed inwardly. "Let him be safe and I will—I will—"

She halted her thoughts. Even in extremity, one did not make bargains with God. Indeed—what act of faith could *she* perform in payment for the life of Justin Garth?

Despite her resolution, first one tear and then another began to trickle silently down the gilded surface of the harp-frame, until she was weeping in earnest. Justin's probable fate was too distressing to contemplate. Why—oh, *why* had she urged him to follow Betsy?

Anything would be easier to face than news of Justin's death. Even if Captain Starr were indeed her father and everyone became aware of his lawless profession, she was convinced that she would be strong enough to face the consequences.

Anthony Rawling was presumed to have died a hero's death in the defence of his country many years ago. The revelation that he was a living highway robber and not a dead patriot would drastically alter her way of life, owned Antonia. Kit would have to face the problem with all its implications. Sir George Kennick would suspect his one-time neighbour of having connived at the removal of his wife's jewellery. Other crimes would be laid at her father's door—many undeservedly so.

Yes, the situation would expand and grow in the manner of a snowball rolling downhill. It would take stern resolution to face the consequences if her supposition were not only true but became a matter for public discussion and an angry reprisal.

Yet she was assured that she could bear any unpleas-

ant eventuality with greater fortitude than she could assume on hearing of Justin's death.

She wondered a little at her own vehemence, the tears drying upon her cheeks. Justin Garth had, in a very short time, become a part of her very existence. To have him wrenched from her by the cruel hand of death would leave her uncaring of life itself.

She conjured up an image of his teasing blue eyes and dark cropped hair, the firm grip of his hands at her shoulders, the feel of his mouth upon her own responsive lips—

Her eyes flew open and she rose abruptly, leaving the harp rocking upon its stand.

"If Dominic does not return soon with news, I shall make Gilchrist ask Mr. Bowden to seek official aid in York," she muttered aloud. "I am assured that *nothing* can make Justin's position more precarious than it is at present."

Thus resolved, she sat down again at her harp and began to play, seeking to draw comfort from her music.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JED FILEY entered the cell-like room of the man who was his prisoner and gave a somewhat wolf-like grin, displaying teeth which were white but uneven. He tilted a candle to drip grease on to the rough floor, then pressed the candle to the grease, holding it there until it rested upright without aid. Then he turned and stared down at the prisoner, looming over him, his shadow huge and threatening in the flickering light.

Justin Garth, bound hand and foot and with his shoulders hunched against the wall, returned the stare steadily enough.

"Beginning to wish you'd left well alone, milord?" demanded Filey with an unpleasant smile. "It don't do for t'likes o' you to set up against t'likes o' me, my fine sir!"

Justin yawned as if bored, then saw his captor's hands clench and decided not to invite further physical ill-use.

"I'd've hit you harder but for thinking 'twas that young fool of a cousin o' yours," went on Jed Filey. "I've no wish to kill *him*. He's got his uses, that one."

"Are you going to kill me?" murmured Justin, squinting up at the man who towered above him.

"Don't like that thought above half, do you, my fine cockerel?" grinned Jed, satisfied that his prisoner was at last reduced to showing fear. "As for killing you

—reckon I'm not sure yet. Happen there'd be somebody as would pay a tidy sum to have you back safe and sound?" he said consideringly.

Suddenly he crouched down in front of the helpless Justin so that their eyes were on the same level. Jed Filey's eyes were bloodshot and his breath smelled sickeningly of stale spirits.

"Happen there's nobody!" contradicted Justin cheerily, in a fair imitation of his captor's accent. "Reckon they'll just say good riddance if I'm not seen again!"

Jed Filey scowled and sat back on his heels.

"Don't you take that tone wi' me," he threatened, then gave a slow smile. "If I send young Bet wi' a note to that Miss Rawling, reckon *she'll* pay up—and no hesitation!"

Justin's unshaven jaw tightened fractionally and Jed Filey gave a nod and rose to his feet.

"Aye—Missy Rawling won't want you dead, though I doubt I can say t'same o' your cousin," he jeered.

Justin was silent, not because he believed Dominic might desire his death but because he had no wish to have Antonia involved with this ruffian. Jed was right! Somehow she would get together the sum demanded and entrust it to her erstwhile maid. Justin's thoughts flew on grimly. Antonia's reward for that move would doubtless be the midnight delivery of his lifeless body upon her doorstep.

"Where is Captain Starr?" he asked suddenly, hoping to turn Jed's mind into other channels.

Jed Filey scowled and took a backward step.

"Him? He's gone soft on us! He never was much o' a leader. Reckon I've taken over from him." His eyes narrowed. "What d'you know o' him? Doubtless your cousin's opened his mouth a mite too far. Why else'd you follow Bet?"

"Where is Captain Starr?" repeated Justin determinedly.

"Down south where he'll be no help to you," grunted Filey. "Thought you'd get him to make me let you go, did you, my cockerel? Well—*that's* out! He's got t'fool idea o' setting up house and living like a respectable gent again—"

"*Was* he once a gentleman?" interrupted Justin.

Jed Filey's boot poked at him none too gently.

"I've not had my say, milord! Hush you up 'til I give you leave to speak. A gentleman? Aye—so he says, though I only believe what my eyes tell me's t'truth. He's naught but a tobyman to me—an' past his prime at that. 'Tis no joke, I tell you, to stop a coach wi' naught but an old man wi' rusty fingers shivering on his pistol to back you up. Saps your confidence, in a manner o' speaking."

Justin had been thinking rapidly. If Captain Starr were indeed Antonia's father and had once lived in Yorkshire as plain Mr. Rawling, then Jed Filey was unaware of it. He did not appear bright enough to dissemble.

"Being a fine gent you'll be able to write a fair hand, I don't doubt?" pursued Jed. "Reckon I'll have you write your lady-friend a note, like. Aye—reckon that's what I'll do."

Justin stared up at him.

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"How will you know I've written what you ask?" he murmured.

Jed Filey grinned, unoffended, not taking this slur on his education as an insult.

"Aye, reckon I *can't* read—but Betsy can," he countered. "Captain Starr had her Ma see she was taught well enough. Bet'll tell me if you write aught but what I say." He caught Justin's speculative look and added: "Don't you be thinking you can twist *her* about your thumb! Your cousin had that notion, too. She's smart, is Bet, an' knows which side o' t'bread t'butter's on! Sides o' which—she's a mite scared o' what I'd do to her if she thought o' listening to your fine words." He moved towards the door, nodding at the candle. "I'll leave yon light. Think on what I've said. I'll be back later!"

On being left alone, Justin's first action was to shuffle himself across the room on the seat of his breeches, until he reached the spot where Jed had stuck the candle. His hands were tied in front of him. If he could burn through the rope with the candle-flame and then untie his ankles, surely he could overpower whoever was next to enter the room? He could not be so meek and unimaginative as to sit here waiting until Jed passed sentence upon him!

The candle-flame danced about disobligingly and he found he was holding his breath, afraid that he might blow it out. He was rewarded at last with a faint odour of charred rope and exulted inwardly. Perhaps this manoeuvre would be successful after all?

Three seconds later, Justin gave a muffled curse and lifted his bound hands to suck at a burned wrist.

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He moved a little too forcefully and the candle became dislodged from its grease-anchor. It fell neatly sideways and extinguished itself as the flame hit the floor.

"And that," he muttered wryly, "appears to be that! Antonia would be ashamed of my lack of invention."

It was a sobering thought that in all likelihood he would never see Antonia Rawling again. Apart from Jed, Betsy, Rat-face and the corpulent individual, he might never again see a living soul. Having no desire to obtain an early view of the next world, he racked his brain for a solution to the problem of outwitting Jed Filey and remaining alive.

* * *

Justin jerked into wakefulness and found that he was lying at an uncomfortable angle against his prison wall. He had no sure way of telling the time of day or night but could see no tell-tale cracks of light where roof met walls. The contents of his pockets, including his watch, had been gone along with his warm top-coat when he had first come to his senses on the dusty floor of the tavern-loft. No doubt Jed Filey had found a use for them—as he would do for the rest of his victim's clothing in the not so distant future, thought Justin gloomily. He had no intention of involving Antonia any further by writing the required note. It needed little imagination to guess at Filey's reaction to his refusal.

What had caused him to wake so abruptly? He listened intently, but even the four-legged creatures within the walls were silent. Suddenly a sound caught his ears—a sound of a sharply indrawn breath. He turned his eyes across the darkened room towards the

dim-seen door. A scuffling noise reached him, then the protesting scrape of the door's bolt.

Was Jed Filey, somewhat the worst for intoxicating drink, attempting to gain entry and fumbling in his befogged state? Justin braced his shoulders against the wall, wishing he could heave himself on to his feet. He waited tensely.

The bolt gave a final squeak and then the door opened. In the lesser darkness of the passage outside the room he could see the blurred outline of someone infinitely smaller than Jed Filey or his henchmen.

"Mr. Garth, sir?" came Betsy's hesitant whisper. "Are—are you awake, sir?"

Justin frowned. He heard the swish of the girl's skirts as she came cautiously towards him.

"Betsy?" he muttered.

Jed must have sent her! This could only be some form of trick to tempt him out of the room.

"Oh—*sir!*" Betsy bent over him and began to pluck at the knots securing his wrists. "I—I *can't!*" she wailed softly. "Can you stand up, sir, and jump out into the light? Come—I'll help you."

Warily, suspiciously, he allowed the girl to aid him to his feet. She put a slender arm about him and obediently he moved towards the open floor in a series of shuffling jumps.

"Stay here, sir! I'll get a knife," promised Betsy, and she left him leaning against the wall of the passage in dulled amazement.

Gradually his wits cleared. The girl appeared to be contemplating his escape! She reappeared minutes

later, a wicked-looking knife in her hand. Silently she began to saw at his ropes and he watched in fascination as strand by strand they severed and loosened. Fervently he hoped that the knife would not slip and slice into his flesh, but Betsy's grip on it was sure. Carefully she unwound the remnants of rope and dropped them to the floor.

"Now your feet, sir," she whispered. "Can you manage or shall I?"

His wrists and ankles were sore and wealed from his constant attempt at gaining his freedom, but neither of his bonds had bitten into the flesh sufficiently to cause cramp through stoppage of circulation. He massaged his wrists, eyeing his rescuer thoughtfully.

"Where is Jed?" he asked softly.

Betsy put a finger to her lips and nodded towards a half-open door. She beckoned him to follow her, then turned back to face him.

"They are all asleep," she murmured. "I put some stuff in their drinks. 'Twas stuff Antonia's Ellen uses for the toothache. It makes her sleep like the dead. Reckon I've used a drop too much," she added, "but I had to be sure. Jed was going to kill you in the morning, sir. I had to do something."

His mind in a whirl, Justin followed the slight figure of Betsy through the doorway and then blinked at the brightness of candlelight. His eyes were momentarily dazzled for he had been in the dark since arriving here, except for the light of his gaolers' candles.

A startling scene met his eyes. The room had a low beamed ceiling. Its furnishings appeared to be adequate, if rough-hewn. A low fire glowed in the vast

untidy hearth, making him suddenly aware of how cold he had been in his lonely cell. Lighted candles flickered upon every available surface as if their cost was of no account. In a dwelling of this type one or two rushlights might have been expected. From the profusion of candles, it was obvious that the trade of highwayman was a profitable one.

On each side of the hearth were wooden armchairs. In one of these lay slumped the broad figure of Jed Filey. In the other, chin upon chest, reclined his fat associate. Upon a footstool, his head resting in foolish companionship against Filey's leg, was the undersized Rat-face.

The room resounded with the noisy breathing of the sleeping men. In the hearth were two empty ale-mugs. In Rat-face's hand was clutched another mug, its contents having spilled out, making a small puddle on the stone floor.

Justin stared in stupefaction, until he felt Betsy tugging fretfully at his arm.

"Come away, sir!" she pleaded. "They'll wake up soon and Jed'll *kill* me!"

Justin put his arm about her thin shoulders and led her into the room with him. He trod warily although there seemed to be no immediate danger of the sleepers waking up.

"This—this is the stuff I gave them," said Betsy haltingly. She shrugged off Justin's arm and fished in the pocket of her gown. Tentatively she held out an empty bottle. "Jed told me to fill up their mugs," she went on. "They were too busy talking about killing you to watch me. I poured some of the stuff into each mug.

'Twas nearly full and old Ellen didn't know I'd taken it. I—I thought I'd better use it all so that they'd stay asleep long enough. Sir—oh, sir," she moaned, pulling at his arm again. "Come on, do, or I'll ride off and leave you. I daren't let Jed get his hands on me!"

She gave a squeak of fresh alarm. After a frowning sniff at the empty bottle, Justin had moved over cautiously to where the men slumbered. Betsy pressed her hands to her mouth and retreated to the door. Justin bent over each man in turn, spending several thoughtful moments with Rat-face.

He saw his own coat hanging carelessly upon the back of an unoccupied chair and picked it up slowly. He did not particularly wish to wear it after Jed, but this was no time for squeamishness. Slowly he put it on, casting a frowning look at the terrified Betsy. He supposed that the correct procedure at this point would be to tie up the men—two of them—and ride in search of the nearest law-officers. He shot another look in Betsy's direction. The child was shivering now and was clutching at the door-frame for support. Reaction was beginning to set in and she seemed upon the point of collapse.

Justin made up his mind quickly. He moved silently about the room, extinguishing all of the candles but one. With this in his hand he went back to the trembling Betsy.

"Where are the stables, child?" he asked softly. "Come, show me the way. There's nothing to be gained by staying here."

He took her cold hand in his and allowed her to lead him out of the door and round to the rear of the building.

In a rough lean-to shed were two horses. Justin held up the candle and peered into the shed. The animals snorted and moved restlessly.

"Is this one my cousin's horse?" said Justin.

On the way out of the house Betsy had picked up her bundle. She clutched it to her now and wailed aloud.

"Oh!" she moaned. "I'd forgotten! Yes, 'tis Mr. Dominic's! *I can't* go back with you, sir. He'll have me hanged for a horse-thief!"

Justin laughed softly.

"He'll do no such thing, child!" he retorted. "You must certainly come with me, for I will not leave you here. Shall we take a mount each or would you prefer to sit up with me on Dom's horse?"

Betsy gave a gasp.

"Oh—please let me ride with you, sir, for we cannot steal Jed's horse! He—he was good to me after my Ma died," she added excusingly.

Justin marvelled that she had stolen Dominic's horse but could not bring herself to rob Jed Filey of his. In silence he secured the ornate saddle to his cousin's horse, led the animal out into the open air, put out the candle and lifted up Betsy. Carefully he mounted, easing himself into the saddle and wincing at the pain caused by this simple action. There could not be an inch of unbruised flesh upon his entire body, he reflected.

They rode on through the chilly night in silence and he felt Betsy turning to catch a last glimpse of the cottage which housed the sleeping Jed Filey. It was as well he had kept the whole truth from the child, he mused grimly. Old Ellen's toothache remedy was more potent than she had guessed.

Dominic Garth's horse moved sure-footedly along the country lane, seeming to need no encouragement to put a respectable distance between Jed Filey and itself. Suddenly Justin gave a laugh.

"Betsy," he said. "Betsy—have you the slightest notion of where we are? I swear I am completely lost!"

"We came south and I don't think we're still in Yorkshire," admitted the girl. "Oh, sir, I don't deserve your kindness. You could've ridden off and just left me. No one will want me back at Rawling House. I stole Mr. Dominic's horse and I took Ellen's sleeping-stuff and I spied on Miss Antonia. They'll hand me over to the justices for h-hanging!" she stammered.

He did not condemn her desire for self-preservation for his time of imprisonment had made him aware that he, too, was not altogether free from cowardice.

"Miss Antonia will not be unkind, Betsy," he reassured the girl patiently.

"I'm not afraid of *her*," said Betsy, clutching at Justin's coat as the horse stumbled momentarily in a rut. "She's a good, kind lady. I—I didn't want to go to Rawling House. Captain Starr said he was my father and he'd got me a place to live that was better than the tavern. Jed wanted me to go. He said I had to find out if Miss Antonia and Miss Clarissa and Mrs. Wade had jewels and such-like. He'd have robbed the house if I'd said they had a lot of jewels."

Justin stared ahead. Already there was a greyness in the night sky. Soon it would be dawn.

"Did you say anything about jewellery to Jed?" he asked absently, his mind occupied with discovering some indication of the direction they were taking. He felt the girl shake her head vehemently.

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"No—I'd never let him rob *her*," she stated. "She tried to be kind to me. Where will she live when she marries you, sir? Will you both be at Rawling House?" she added as if by way of an afterthought.

Justin reined in the horse and turned to look at the pale blur which was Betsy's face.

"Who spoke of marriage, Betsy?" he said softly. "Not Miss Antonia, I am sure."

The girl returned his look.

"I didn't take you for a fool, sir," she muttered. "But if you don't wed Miss Antonia, you'll be more than a fool!"

Justin did not reply. They rode on a little further in silence. At last a sagging fingerpost loomed up in the misty greyness. The writing upon it was blurred but decipherable.

"York!" said Betsy in amazement. "Look, sir, it says York! I can't make out how many miles off we are, but at least we're going the right way."

She drooped wearily against him and Justin felt a stab of compunction. The child had saved his life and had shown amazing courage in tampering with the drinks of the highwaymen. He could at least allow her a moment's rest.

"Time for a halt, Betsy!" he said and dismounted, lifting her down beside him.

She clung to him for a moment, then gave him a fierce hug with all the strength of her thin arms.

"You're much nicer than Mr. Dominic!" she declared. "*He'd* have tied me up and left me with Jed."

Colouring, she stepped back from him and turned to stroke the horse's nose. Justin smiled wryly. He could well do without hero-worship from the child. He had

troubles enough without adding to them! He hoped Antonia would have some suggestion of what to do with Betsy. He gave a sigh. He could trust Antonia! Then a frown marred his brow and he rubbed a hand across his unshaven chin. A certain matter of a duel stood between himself and Miss Rawling. How could he explain that to her satisfaction without implicating anyone else?

He sighed again and thrust his hands into his pockets, staring about him at the grey, misty dawn. Betsy had sunk down wearily on to the roadside bank. He must not let her sit upon the damp grass for long or she would take a chill.

His fingers discovered that the pockets of his coat were not empty. Eagerly he investigated their contents, hoping that his watch and money were intact. His watch was indeed there, but its glass was cracked and it had stopped. There did not appear to be any coins with which they might buy refreshment, either. So much for that!

A cloth-wrapped bundle was in one pocket. Carefully he lifted it out. It could only be something belonging to Jed Filey for it was not *his*. He opened up the folds of the cloth curiously. Betsy rose to her feet to watch him, her eyes startled. Even before the contents were revealed, Justin had an inkling of their identity. Surely he had not had the luck to deprive Jed Filey of Lady Kennick's jewellery?

"O—oh!" gasped Betsy, her eyes round. "It's that old lady's jewels! Jed promised to show me but he never did." She put out a grubby finger to touch the

brightly winking stones reverently. "I—I don't think they're all here, sir. Jed said there was a boxful."

Justin looked closely at the necklets, rings and ear-clips which lay jumbled together in his hand. Then carefully he wrapped them up again.

"Betsy," he said, "I can promise you that no one will hurt you now. Instead, you may well receive a reward for helping to recover Sir George Kennick's valuables."

Betsy gasped.

"No!" she said in alarm. "Don't say *I* got them back, please! They'll catch Jed one day and he'll give me away when they question him. He'll swear I helped to steal the jewels. He'll want to get even because I let you get away from him." She shuddered. "'Tis all very well for you to talk! I'll never rest easy again. Jed Filey'll seek me out if it's the last thing he ever does!"

Justin watched the panic-stricken girl in silence. How could he explain that Jed might not even live to stand trial? Old Ellen's sleeping draught was meant to be taken as a single drop in a nightly drink. Poor innocent Betsy had given her erstwhile accomplices what amounted to a lethal dose of the drug.

Rat-face had been dead when they left the cottage. Possibly his constitution had not been equal to the dose. Yes—head resting against his one-time leader, the undersized Rat-face had undoubtedly been dead.

The shallow breathing and clammy, unnatural pallor of Jed Filey and the fat-stomached man had indicated that death might soon release them too from that drugged sleep. It would be kinder to keep poor Betsy in

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ignorance of what she had achieved that night. Would she have set Justin free, had she realised that the price was the lives of her three associates? He strongly doubted it. Although Jed Filey had treated her roughly, she had not looked upon him as an enemy.

Justin knew that by keeping silent on the probability of Jed's death, he would be allowing Betsy to worry unnecessarily about retribution for setting the prisoner free. She could bear a little anxiety better than the knowledge of what she had done, he decided finally.

Had he had any inkling of the cottage's whereabouts it might have been possible to have brought medical aid to Jed and the corpulent man in time to save their lives. But with the panic-stricken Betsy upon his hands and with his complete ignorance of the cottage's position, such a move had not been practical. Justin knew that he was almost as guilty as poor Betsy in allowing two of the men to die. He did not expect this thought to haunt him and wondered a little at his own callous attitude. Surely any human life was sacred, even if it were reserved for the hangman?

He made Betsy remount the horse behind him and was glad that she could not guess at his thoughts. The sooner he got her safely back to Rawling House, the better. He knew that in spite of all he had already decided, his conscience would not allow him to keep silent on the conditions left behind at the cottage. The law-officers would have to make do with what he chose to disclose to them. He would make no mention of Betsy. No one need ever know that she had had connection with the highwaymen. Nor would he implicate himself as a suspect for the killing of the three men.

Perhaps it would be taken for granted that a rival gang had done this deed.

The horse jogged along wearily and its riders were at last rewarded by the sight of another fingerpost. If our luck holds, thought Justin with tired humour, we shall arrive at Rawling House in time for breakfast!

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"AND that is your final word, Antonia?" said William Drew slowly, his voice laden with disbelief. "You will not reconsider? After all, there is no great urgency."

Antonia managed a shaky laugh.

"William—dear, kind William," she murmured, "you do me too much honour! I am not at all the sort of wife for you. You must choose a worthier one than I. I do not have the qualities you seek."

She was half-indignant to observe William Drew nodding in agreement. He gave her a puzzled look.

"I admit you are less *biddable* than I had supposed, but after all, that is no great fault," he allowed weightily. "I would not wish for a wife with no mind of her own. I have always had a very high regard for you, Antonia, and I thought you returned my feelings. Your aunt—"

Antonia fought down the annoyance rising in her.

"My dear aunt talks a deal of nonsense, William," she said gently. "She wishes to see me *settled* and you are to hand. That is the whole of it." She cast him a worried look. In spite of the problems besetting her and her terrible anxiety in waiting for news of Justin, she had no desire to trample upon Mr. Drew's tenderest feelings. "You will not feel that my refusal of your offer means you must leave Rawling House, I hope?" she said. "Kit would be loath to lose you."

"Leave Rawling House?" echoed William in bewilderment. "I have no intention of deserting my position, Antonia. I shall nurse my personal grief in silence, but I hope I shall not fail in my duty."

Antonia had an hysterical desire to laugh aloud at his pompous manner.

"Perhaps we may still be friends, William?" she suggested unsteadily.

He gave her a doubtful, frowning nod.

"Perhaps," he agreed. "Yet you must admit that you helped to raise my hopes, only to dash them to the ground! I shall need a little time to adjust myself to mere civil friendship." He eyed her shaking shoulders with a hurt frown. "*You* at least are not downcast, I observe. Perhaps you are awaiting a better offer, Antonia? I trust you will think twice before considering a *Garth* proposal?"

He had bowed himself out of the room in cold silence before Antonia could frame an indignant reply. She clenched her hands to her sides and bit her lip to prevent it trembling. She knew she had hurt William Drew's pride badly and had shaken his assurance. He had made his offer of marriage in supreme confidence that she would accept him, listing his prospects before her for inspection. Her refusal had amazed him and injured his feelings sufficiently to make him wish to hurt her in turn.

She sat down slowly, staring across the room at the graceful lines of her harp. Would she have allowed herself to be persuaded into marriage with William, but for the arrival of Justin Garth? After all, she had felt a kind of affection for William which might have grown

with the years into an unexciting substitute for love. But love—*real*, unquestioning love was what she felt for Justin. Come what may, she could never accept a second-best *affection* after finding herself truly in love.

Her future happiness depended not upon a formal offer of marriage, as William Drew had jibed, but on the certain knowledge that she was loved in return. If Justin Garth were not restored to her, if she never had the opportunity to gauge his feeling for her—then her future would be empty indeed.

Antonia put little faith in the hope that Dominic would secure his cousin's release. Nothing had been heard of him since he left, declaring his intention to seek out the highwaymen. With each hour that passed, her heart grew heavier. Then, into her mood of black despair had come foolish, confident William, with his emotionless offer of marriage!

Trying to smile at the ridiculous situation, Antonia found herself in bitter tears of hopelessness. She rose to her feet and moved to sit at her harp. Falteringly she plucked at the strings, filling the room with the wavering strains of "Greensleeves". Justin had liked this air. She must play it and think—nay, *believe*—that he would return unharmed.

Before the tune was halfway through the door opened gently. Antonia played on, the tears drying upon her cheeks. She cast an indifferent glance at the door, hoping that the intruder was not the spiteful-tongued Clarissa.

"Well, my lady Greensleeves," murmured Justin Garth. "This is a fine reception, love!"

Antonia rose abruptly to her feet, her cheeks flushing

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then whitening. She swayed and clutched at the harp, causing it to move unsteadily.

"Antonia!"

Justin crossed the room in rapid strides and caught her as she fell. He half-led, half-carried her to a low couch and deposited her upon it gently. He was obliged to sit down beside her for he could not have loosed the hold of her hands on his coat, even had he wished. He drew her to him firmly and held her as she began to weep and tremble with reaction, content to have her close to him at last.

"J-Justin?" she whispered eventually into his chest. "Please—never go away again. I cannot b-bear it if you do!"

She wept again silently, shamed by her own desperate admission. Justin Garth's heart leaped within him and he smoothed her hair from her wet cheeks with a far from steady hand. She took the hand in hers and held it to her lips, murmuring his name again. With an effort, Justin put her from him at last and smiled into her wet, ashamed eyes.

"Come, Antonia!" he rallied her. "Do you not wish to hear of my adventures?"

She shook her head forcefully.

"You are here. Nothing else matters," she whispered. "Oh, Justin! I am sorry if I—I embarrass you but I thought you must surely be dead!"

"I am not in the least embarrassed, love—merely relieved," he assured her cheerfully, then bent his head to kiss her hard upon the lips.

Antonia clung to him in desperation, then withdrew, a frown creasing her brow.

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"You have grown a beard," she murmured, raising a hand to caress his unshaven jaw wonderingly and looking up at his face properly for the first time. "Justin—what have they done to you?" she gasped.

"I am bruised and in need of sleep," he said reassuringly. "That is all, love!"

Antonia moved away from him and gripped her hands together in her lap.

"Have you just arrived?" she asked, suddenly shy of him.

"I arrived with Betsy a short time ago," he said, moving to shorten the gap on the couch between them. "I had to wash first, Antonia, or you would not have recognised me." He reached out to touch her tear-stained cheek with a gentle finger. "This shirt you have just soaked with your weeping belongs to Gilchrist, your coachman. He insisted that I put it on before I came in search of you. My own is in a disgusting state."

Antonia blushed suddenly.

"D-does Gilchrist know you have come in to see me?" she murmured.

"Why of course he does!" said Justin cheerfully, putting an arm about her waist and drawing her close to him once again. "He said I would have time to tell you my tale whilst he makes up a bed for me above the stables. I must have rest, you see, for I've had little sleep for days."

For a moment he thought Antonia would move away from him, but with a sigh she rested her cheek against his shirt again.

"Listen well, love," he advised. "I'm half-dead

with weariness." He went on to tell her of his abduction by Jed Filey and of the part young Betsy had played in his escape. "Treat her gently, Antonia," he murmured, "for she saved my life." He spoke of the drugging of Jed and his associates and said that Gilchrist had sent message to Mr. Bowden. "I trust he'll set law-officers to find the whereabouts of that cottage," he went on, "though I doubt they'll find anyone alive there."

"Poor Betsy!" said Antonia softly. "She must never learn what she has done."

It was evident that Justin had told the truth when he stated he was in need of sleep. Pleasant as it was to sit within the shelter of his arms, Antonia stirred at last and made him rise to his feet. His dark blue eyes were shadowed and heavy and the growth of beard gave him an unfamiliar appearance, yet never before had he been more dear to her.

"Justin?" she said haltingly as they reached the door.

"Yes, my love?" he said half-mockingly, his arm about her shoulders.

Antonia took a steadying breath and freed herself, moving back a step.

"I am sorry I spoke of that—that duel," she said. "It was none of my business. I have regretted mentioning it ever since you left that evening. I don't care how many duels you have fought, Justin," she went on bravely, looking down and refusing to meet his eyes. "I—I love you, Justin! I know 'tis forward of me to speak so, but I thought I would never have the chance to do so. I thought you must be dead, you see!"

Justin regarded her with sleepy thoughtfulness then patted her shoulder approvingly. He swayed on his feet as if intoxicated with a strong liquor.

"That's a good girl!" he murmured, his voice slurring. "We must talk later, when I am myself again."

She rang for a manservant to aid the weary Justin up to Gilchrist's quarters above the stables, then sank down upon the couch, pressing her hands to her hot cheeks. She had indeed been *forward*, but Justin had not appeared to object. He was alive. He was safe. Nothing else mattered!

Although Justin Garth had contrived to make his arrival as undramatic as possible, it was inevitable that he had been observed.

"Was that Justin I saw in the stableyard with Gilchrist?" demanded Kit Rawling of his sister, some little time later. "Gilchrist is close as a clam and will not satisfy my curiosity. I did not know Justin had grown a beard. I scarcely recognised him! Tonia, where *has* he been?"

Antonia had little chance to collect her wits and decide what to tell her brother, for clearly he was in no mood to accept anything but the truth. He would not easily be fobbed off with evasions.

"You remember our talk of highwaymen, Kit?" she murmured carefully. Kit gave an eager nod, so with a sigh she went on: "Justin became involved with a certain desperate character and was knocked on the head and made a prisoner for a time."

Her brother stared at her, his expression sceptical.

"That sounds a rum sort of tale to me, Tonia!" he objected. "Why should a highwayman take a

prisoner—and why Justin Garth, of all unlikely people?”

“I cannot explain fully,” floundered Antonia. “Perhaps Justin will tell you more when he recovers. He is completely exhausted and has gone to rest in Gilchrist’s quarters.”

Kit’s frown deepened.

“There’s been something afoot and I’ve been kept out of it!” he said in disgust. “Never fear, sister mine. I’ll find out just what has been taking place.”

“Oh—*hush*, Kit!” said Antonia in exasperation. “Justin was abducted, he escaped and has just arrived here safely. Surely that is enough for the moment!”

Kit eyed her narrowly.

“William said Justin was in here with you,” he said slowly. “Is there a *conspiracy*?”

“*Really*, Kit!” breathed Antonia heavily. “I wish William Drew would keep to his own affairs. He need not watch me now that I have refused—”

She broke off in a hurry, for she had not intended to speak of William’s offer of marriage.

Her brother let out a low whistle.

“So you have refused him?” he said in obvious relief. “That is a weight from my mind! I have not liked to consider *him* as a relative by marriage. If you really wish to be wed, Tonia, I could suggest a better man than our stolid William.”

Antonia halted him, her colour heightening.

“That is quite enough, Christopher Rawling!” she said hastily. Then she added beseechingly: “Please, Kit, do not tell anyone I have refused William. He must not think I am discussing his proposal so freely.”

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"I shall be the soul of tact on *that* count," promised her brother, "but I cannot say the same for this odd disappearance of Justin's. I'll find out the truth of that!"

Antonia hoped fervently that the "truth" would not include the suggestion that Captain Starr was a close relative. Come what may, she was determined to keep that news from Kit.

The day wore on, the hours seeming to drag on leaden feet. Antonia was eager to see Justin again but knew that she must allow him time to sleep off his weariness. She had spoken briefly to Betsy and had thanked the girl warmly for the part she had played in assisting Justin's escape. Betsy had gone to her old room to rest, for she was almost as weary as Justin himself.

Afternoon dinner was taken at two o'clock with only Antonia and her aunt and cousin seated at the vast dining-table, for Kit and William Drew were to eat later. They had set out to discuss the winter feeding of stock upon the farms on the estate. It was the Rawling policy to keep alive a large number of cows during the winter, salting down only the beef necessary for consumption.

"We are very quiet here today," observed Mrs. Wade brightly, as she attacked a plate of boiled mutton, pudding and vegetables with her customary vigour. Her languor was always forgotten at table. "Antonia? Clarissa? Have you nothing to say for yourselves?"

"It is so boring and dull in the country," said Clarissa sulkily. "Nothing happens, Mama, so there is simply nothing to discuss. I wish I might go to London and see a little of *life*."

Antonia choked upon her mutton. Dull? If Clarissa only knew of the events which had taken place, she would not speak of dullness! Henrietta Wade eyed her niece with concern.

"Eat more slowly, dear," she advised. "This meat is a little tough. I must speak to Cook."

Once the meal was over, Antonia escaped to her own room. She picked up a book, only to set it down impatiently. A piece of needlework received the same treatment. She knew that she would concentrate on nothing until the time of waiting was over and Justin was recovered of his weariness.

She had declared her love for him, had dismissed the duel as unimportant, yet what had *he* actually said? Antonia grew uncomfortable as she speculated on Justin's reaction to her avowal of love. He had been too tired to take it in properly, she was sure. What would he say when he was himself again? She grew hot with shame and bit upon her lip. Had Justin accepted her protestations from mere weary politeness? Did he still, in fact, love the lady over whom that duel had been fought?

She did not stay long in her bed-chamber for her maid, old Ellen, came bustling in filled with curiosity about Betsy's unheralded return. Finally, Antonia made the library her refuge, then wished she had not, for the painted eyes of her father in the portrait above the hearth seemed to follow her every move, their expression mocking rather than benign.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

EARLY evening darkness brought the return of Dominic Garth. He was not alone. Antonia's first inkling that something was about to break the suspense of her afternoon's waiting was a somewhat mysterious message delivered by an expressionless manservant. Miss Rawling—if she would be so good—was required out upon the terrace and had best don a cloak as snow had begun to fall. Mr. Dominic Garth was there and begged speech with her. Having voiced this odd-sounding request, the manservant was able to go back to the kitchen-quarters to speculate freely with his fellows.

Antonia collected a cloak and put it on, neglecting to send for old Ellen. Dominic would not have sent for her in this secretive fashion if he had wished an audience to their conversation—he would merely have made an undramatic entrance through the front door. She supposed that he had come to tell her that he had been unable to discover where his cousin was held prisoner. He would not know that Justin had escaped!

She let herself out through the glass doors of the library and stood upon the terrace, peering through the darkness. Snowflakes were falling silently from the velvet dark of a starless sky. Antonia shivered and drew her cloak more warmly about her.

“Dominic!” she called softly. “Dominic Garth—are you there?”

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Seconds elapsed and then two shadowy figures materialised from behind an evergreen bush and came to join her in the comparative shelter of the paved terrace.

"Captain Starr!" breathed Antonia. "Dominic—you did find him, after all! I am obliged to you! I am obliged to *you*, also, sir," she said, turning to face the bulky masked figure of the man she suspected to be Anthony Rawling, her father. "We will not need your aid though, for Justin escaped with Betsy's help and is resting up in Gilchrist's quarters at this very moment." She took a hesitant step forwards, then put an impulsive hand upon the gloved one of the highwayman. "Thank you, sir, from the bottom of my heart. You came when you were needed. Dominic—thank you, also. Justin will be most grateful that you tried to help him."

Captain Starr's eyes regarded her through the slits of his mask, then suddenly he raised his other hand and gripped hers in both of his.

"You're a good girl, Antonia!" he said gruffly.

Dominic Garth stared for a moment, then gave a cough and grinned.

"Well, if Justin is safe, then what are we to do about friend Jed?" he murmured. "He'll be after someone's skin, I don't doubt."

"Oh, I had forgotten!" said Antonia with a start. "You cannot know. Jed Filey and his two friends are dead! In order to aid Justin's escape, Betsy drugged the drinks of the men. She thought they would sleep long enough for the escape to be made. Justin says that the poor child gave them an overdose of some potion or other. She had no notion of its strength, you see, and

was afraid to use too little. Justin says one man was dead already when they left, the others close to death. Betsy must never learn what she has done," added Antonia hastily. "I believe law-officers have been sent in search of the house where Justin was held prisoner. No doubt the bodies have been discovered by now."

The highwayman released her hands.

"Jed Filey is dead?" he said incredulously. "And at the hands of my daughter? I can scarcely credit it! If this is true, then there is now no barrier between my present life and my new respectable existence with Betsy—if she will have me."

Antonia opened her mouth and tried to ask Captain Starr the all-important question. If he were indeed Anthony Rawling, there would be no need for him to go away. Could he not start his new life here in his own identity? Surely some explanation could be manufactured to satisfy the curiosity of their neighbours and of Kit? He was fully entitled to take possession of Rawling House—if he were her father. She tried again to speak, but the words would not come and her lips were dry. She half-considered making a snatch at the concealing mask, in order to compare the highwayman's features with the painted face of her father in the portrait in the library. Vaguely she heard Dominic muttering in utter disbelief:

"Jed Filey cannot be dead!"

Then suddenly, Antonia's moment of decision was past, for the silent night air became rent with sound. Something whistled past her cheek and she fell back with a gasp of alarm. Captain Starr gave a grunt of pain and she realised that he had been shot. Even as a

broad-shouldered figure loomed up unsteadily from the bushes, Dominic made a grab for her and bore her down to the terrace with him, out of harm's way.

The highwayman turned slowly, a hand to a dark, oozing stain upon his chest. Yet strangely enough his free hand was steady as he pointed a pistol in the direction of his assailant.

"Jed?" said Captain Starr in slurring tones. "So you are still alive?"

The man halted and Antonia wriggled free of Dominic's grasp sufficiently to stare in disbelief at the rage-contorted face of the person she knew must be Jed Filey. Even as she looked, Captain Starr fired his pistol at point-blank range and Jed grunted, stumbled upon his feet, but did not fall.

"Aye—I'm alive," he managed, his voice thick with pain. "When I've done wi' t'three o' you, I'm off to find that murdering little wench, Betsy."

Antonia's horrified gaze saw Captain Starr buckle at the knees as he fired a second pistol into Filey's body. Then, with a sigh, the highwayman slumped down and lay still, his head resting against the stonework of the terrace, his hat rolling off out of sight.

Jed Filey staggered but remained miraculously upright as snowflakes drifted lazily down to settle on his clothing. Antonia stifled a scream as he lurched towards herself and Dominic, who was attempting to rise to his feet. Filey swayed drunkenly, then turned and fired another pistol, aiming at the inert body of Captain Starr. Dominic thrust Antonia to one side and stood up warily to face the badly injured Filey.

"Now for you," began the man with difficulty.

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He raised his empty pistols in their direction, then an expression of complete stupefaction crossed his contorted features. With a gasp of pure thwarted rage, he collapsed forwards to rest across the booted feet of the man he had just killed.

Antonia stood up shakily and reached out for Dominic's support. Her legs did not wish to hold her up and the paved terrace appeared to rise and swim before her eyes. Everything was strange and unreal. It just did not seem possible that she had witnessed the violent death of two men in so short a time.

"D-Dominic, are they—are they—" she stammered, clutching at his coat.

Dominic Garth shook her off. He left her side and went to investigate the two fallen men. His face, in the poor light, appeared to have taken on a greenish hue.

"Dead," he nodded at last. "Both dead—Antonia, you must not come near!"

He held her back, but not before she had seen that Jed Filey's second shot had caught Captain Starr full in the face. Even in her half-fainting condition, it crossed her mind that the highwayman's identity must now remain unknown for ever. She clung once more to Dominic for support, then turned her head weakly to see her brother standing at the glass doors, his mouth wide open with shock.

"I thought I heard shots," began Kit, his horrified gaze on the slumped bodies.

The next few minutes passed with vague unrealness for Antonia. When she came properly to her senses, she found she was reclining upon a couch in the library. Close beside her was the anxious face of young Betsy.

"I know what has happened," confessed the girl, her lips quivering. "They're both dead! I promised I'd make you rest in here. Only Mr. Kit heard the sound of shooting. Mr. Dominic says 'tis best that the—the bodies are not found here. They're taking J-Jed and my father to the tavern and leaving them there to be found. They must not be found here, you see."

Antonia gave a gasp of alarm and attempted to rise.

"Kit must not get himself involved," she whispered. "Oh, Betsy—I think I am about to be sick!"

By the time Antonia was physically able to make protest, Kit and Dominic had already left with the two corpses. Once again, it seemed that all she could do was wait. She obeyed meekly enough when Betsy suggested that the waiting should be done up in her own bed-chamber. It was fortunate indeed that neither Clarissa, Aunt Hetta, William Drew nor any of the servants appeared to have heard those fatal shots. It was more than fortunate that Justin Garth, resting in the stable-quarters, should not have heard. If he had learned of what had taken place, then doubtless he too would have left on that grisly errand to the tavern.

It was late and the snow had spread its white coverlet everywhere to the depth of at least one inch when Kit Rawling returned home. On hearing of his arrival, Antonia came to the head of the stairs, then lifted her skirts and ran down into the hall to greet her brother's snow-covered figure. Not heeding the servant who had admitted him, she gasped aloud:

"Kit—you are back at last! Did all go according to plan? Where is Dominic? Did he not come with you? Surely he has not gone back to the Bowdens already?"

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Her brother shook his head warningly as the manservant divested him of his top-coat. She saw that Kit was shivering violently and he was very agitated. He must have returned in some haste for his fair hair held a cap of melting snow and he appeared to have lost his hat. He made a visible effort to control his shivering.

“Send for Justin and have him come into the library with us, Tonia,” he begged, his voice rising unsteadily. “There’s trouble afoot and I can see no way out of it!”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

JUSTIN GARTH put a log of wood on to the fire in the library and poked at the dying embers.

"Come and warm yourself, Kit," he suggested matter-of-factly. "You are half-frozen still. Now, take it steadily, lad, and tell me exactly what has befallen Cousin Dominic."

Kit Rawling slumped on a stool before the hearth and held out his hands to the warmth. He looked at the expectant faces of Justin and Antonia as they sat waiting in chairs on each side of the fire. He gulped, pushed his still-damp hair from his forehead and shivered.

"Jed Filey and Captain Starr, the highwayman, killed each other out on the terrace," he stated baldly. "I heard shots and came out to investigate. Tonia and Dominic were out there. Dom told me what had happened for Tonia was in no fit state to talk. But I've told you that already, Justin. I must tell you about Dom!" He drew in a steadying breath and Antonia tried to give him an encouraging smile although her heart was thumping madly. There was a nightmarish quality about the day's events and she was sure that she would be haunted by them for the rest of her life. Kit went on: "I brought horses round from the stable to the terrace and Dominic and I lifted up the bodies, one across each mount. Dom said 'twas vital the bodies were not found on our doorstep. He said they must be moved so that

awkward questions would not be asked later." Kit shuddered and bit his lip. "There was a deal of blood but the snow will have hidden it by now. The man Filey had been shot twice in the chest and the highwayman—" Kit gulped again, "the highwayman's head was blown half-off. We mounted our horses, I with Filey's body, Dom with Captain Starr, and set off to a tavern round at the rear of Cranworth Woods. It was a stiff ride and the snow fell without ceasing."

Kit rose and began to pace the room as if unable to proceed.

"I will ring for hot drinks for all of us," said Antonia quietly. "Justin, you must let poor Kit collect his thoughts for a moment."

Justin Garth nodded, his eyes on the tense, pacing lad.

"I feel weak as a babe," said Kit angrily. "I'd as lief sit down and weep, Justin! But I must tell you the full tale for someone will have to ride to save Dominic. We must not delay or it may be too late!"

The hot drinks arrived and Kit seemed to take comfort from his. He took a hold on himself and went on:

"After a time we reached the tavern. The door was not locked and Dominic seemed familiar with the place. We carried in the bodies one at a time and put them down upon the floor." He took a drink from his mug. "We were about to leave when we heard a shot and voices. Dominic went to the door, then he called back over his shoulder: 'Hide yourself, Kit! They've seen me.' The men were law-officers and they arrested Dom. It was dark in the tavern so I hid, knowing I could

not save him from so many men. Naturally I was not armed. I—I heard someone come into the tavern and a lantern was lit. The officers saw the dead men and they seemed to know Captain Starr even though his face—” Kit faltered and fell silent.

“Yes, lad?” encouraged Justin urgently, rising to his feet. “What of Cousin Dom? Where have they taken him?”

“They said he was a highwayman, too,” said Kit simply. “He was carrying a pistol and when they searched him they found a *mask* in his pocket.”

“Young idiot!” said Justin shortly. “I knew he’d come to grief in the end.”

“They said he’d be taken to York for trial,” muttered Kit. “They would not listen to a word he said. I got out through the back way, to where we’d left our horses, and galloped home with both of them. They are in the stables now,” he finished wearily. “Justin, someone must ride to York to save Dom or they’ll *hang* him as a highwayman!”

“Justin, what can we do?” demanded Antonia in alarm. “Dominic may have been foolish, but he is not a criminal. *Would* they hang him, Justin?”

Justin Garth nodded grimly.

“In all likelihood they will accuse him of being a member of Captain Starr’s gang,” he said tersely.

“Is there nothing to be done?” said Kit. “I did not desert him from cowardice—I swear it, Justin! I thought ’twas pointless getting myself arrested when I was able to get out and ride for help. I thought *you* would know what to do,” he finished pleadingly.

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"You are no coward, lad!" said Justin reassuringly. "You made the only sensible move in obeying Dom's order to stay hidden."

"Will you ride to York and plead for Dominic?" whispered Antonia. "Justin—suppose they arrest you, too?"

Justin stared thoughtfully into the fire for a moment, then he gave a grim laugh.

"I have just remembered Francis Jackson!" he said unexpectedly. "Have you heard of him? No? Then listen well! Jackson was a highwayman who lived a hundred or so years ago. His memoirs were published and Dom has the book. I've read parts of it myself. It is a most enlightening volume! Jackson wrote that provided a highwayman had committed neither murder nor treason, he could always buy his freedom for a sum of five hundred pounds. I remember Dom drawing my attention to this point, before I knew of his own lawless activities. I have a feeling that a similar ruling holds good today, although they may threaten Dom with transportation instead."

"We are at war with America," objected Antonia, "so surely they cannot consider sending him *there*."

Justin gave her a half-smile.

"No doubt they would think up some far-off place especially for foolish Dom!" he said. He began to move towards the door. "My cousin has been every kind of idiot," he condemned, "but he does not deserve such severe punishment. I must ride over to the Bowdens' home, get together a sum of money, then make for York. I must delay no longer!"

Antonia and her brother stood looking silently at

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Justin and with an exclamation he came back towards them, clapped Kit encouragingly upon the shoulder and bent his dark head to kiss Antonia's trembling lips. This done, he went from the room, leaving brother and sister to gaze at the closed door, prey to a variety of conflicting emotions.

* * *

The following few days were the most uncomfortable ones Antonia had ever spent in her life. Yet she was, at least, spared the necessity of being obliged to pretend to her aunt and cousin that nothing was amiss.

Mrs. Bowden, together with her daughters Patricia and Caroline, came to call at Rawling House. The snow had bestowed a picturesque look upon the countryside without making the roads impassable.

It was revealed by Mrs. Bowden that her husband had gone to York with Justin to secure the release of Dominic. Listening to Mrs. Bowden's excited discourse, it seemed to Antonia that the law-officers who had apprehended Justin's cousin might be those very same men sent by Mr. Bowden to seek out the whereabouts of the cottage where Justin had been kept prisoner. If they had not found the cottage, would they not have gone to the tavern in the hope of discovering some clue or other about Jed Filey? It seemed likely enough to Antonia, although Mrs. Bowden knew nothing of this. How unfortunate for Dominic that the arrival of Kit and himself at the tavern had coincided with that of the law-officers!

To the disappointment of Mrs. Wade and Clarissa,

Mrs. Bowden was in possession of few details. Naturally enough, neither Antonia nor her brother Kit admitted to knowing anything of the situation, although Antonia caught Caroline Bowden eyeing her shrewdly, as if the girl suspected something.

"I always did say Dominic Garth was unreliable," declared Clarissa untruthfully. "One must never be taken-in by a handsome face, must one, Antonia?" she added somewhat maliciously, her eyes upon her cousin.

"Indeed, no," agreed Antonia blandly, though with tight-clenched hands.

"Dominic really has been a very tiresome boy," said Mrs. Bowden, settling herself comfortably as Mrs. Wade poured out tea. "Such scrapes as he got himself into! I did not learn the whole of it until lately." She cast a look at her daughters, Antonia and Clarissa, and shook her head. "I should not really relate this before you girls, but I feel 'tis necessary to do so. You must all take warning against such heedless charmers as Dominic! He has been foolish in the extreme—and see where *that* has put him! He is imprisoned, and only my husband's influence can set him free. Although I doubt he'll hang, I set no store on his escaping transportation. Misguided boy! My husband tells me that his cousin Justin has devoted his entire life to keeping Dominic out of trouble." She halted to shake her head warningly at her entranced listeners. "I do not bid you think too well of *Justin* either, my dears, for he is of the same family, after all! Well—to continue: Dominic was in serious trouble concerning a young female while he was still at school. Imagine that! 'Twas left to Justin as his senior to clear up the matter satisfactorily without

Dominic being sent home in disgrace." Mrs. Bowden ceased speaking for a moment, nodded brightly, then went on: "My husband has all of this as truth from Dominic's own mother. 'Twas she who asked us to take him in for a time. Naturally we were pleased to have Justin, too. Apparently Dominic's Mama promised my husband that his elder cousin would keep her son in order. We could not have taken the boy in without that reassurance for, after all, we have daughters and someone of Dominic's *rakish* reputation—" She coughed and directed a discreet smile at her friend, Mrs. Wade.

Antonia saw that her aunt was not a little indignant—and small wonder, for she had, in all ignorance, planned to wed her precious only daughter to the young rake in question. Receiving nothing but eager anticipation from her listeners, Mrs. Bowden continued:

"Naturally I have no details of Dominic's *entire* career, but mark my words, there is little of credit in it! The reason for his mother begging us hide her boy in the country was a *duel*!" She paused dramatically. "Yes—a duel! In actual fact he did not fight the duel for Justin accepted the challenge himself."

Antonia's mouth dropped foolishly open and she stared in fascination at her garrulous neighbour.

"I thought that would make you all stare!" nodded Mrs. Bowden complacently. "It seems that Dominic had been *indiscreet* with a married woman. But when the husband discovered the affair, the shameless hussy named Justin to protect Dominic. Imagine that, my dears! It passes belief, does it not? Dominic's Mama was loud in her praise of Justin (says my husband), but I

am not so sure he is to be commended. Would he have accepted the duel and risked death had he been completely *blameless*? I am certain he would not! Well—the outcome of this duel was that the wronged husband was badly injured and that both Justin and Dominic were obliged to be discreet until everything blows over.”

It seemed that Mrs. Bowden had finally run out of breath, for she sipped at her cooling tea, nodding in delight at the effect of her revelations upon her companions.

“I do wish you had spoken earlier of this,” said Mrs. Wade in outraged tones. “This shows up the Garths—both of them—in a most unpleasant light. How *dared* Dominic show such partiality for my poor Clarissa, with a cloud hanging over his good name? I admit I am *vastly* annoyed with the Garths for their deceitful ways.”

“Oh, do hush, Mama!” demanded Clarissa rudely. She turned eagerly to Mrs. Bowden. “Pray finish your tale, I beg you! Did the husband die or has he recovered? Both Dominic and Justin had been decidedly odd in their behaviour. *Has* the man died? Are they obliged to flee the country?”

Mrs. Bowden blinked and set down her tea cup.

“I really cannot say,” she admitted in bewilderment, “but it cannot concern any of us any longer, I am sure. Once Dominic has been saved from the hangman, then he and Justin will leave us. We cannot be expected to extend our hospitality further under such circumstances. Those two young men have used us ill! Had I known from the first, they would never have been allowed to set foot in my home!”

Caroline Bowden gave a soft laugh.

"You are very dramatic, Mama!" she murmured. "Anyone might suppose our guests to be criminals!" She shot a sidelong glance at Antonia as she spoke. "We must not accept that *Justin* is in the wrong. 'Twas noble of him to take his cousin's blame."

She was disappointed when Antonia did not respond to this attempt at generosity, for she was certain that her friend held the elder Garth cousin in esteem and would be unhappy at the blackening of his character.

Antonia was far from unhappy. Indeed, she was singing inwardly. Justin's part in the duel had been explained at last. It had been nothing more than his habitual protection of Dominic. He had not been involved personally with the lady at all! Antonia acknowledged the fact that Justin would not have reached the age of almost thirty years without forming attachments of some kind or other. All that had troubled her had been the distasteful business of the duel. With that explained to her satisfaction, any facts which might subsequently come to light would not have the power to worry her. With the "married lady" set in her correct perspective, Antonia could view her own relationship with Justin Garth through new eyes. Ignoring the conversation of her companions, she indulged herself in the delightful pastime of dwelling at length on each of her meetings with Justin. Once he returned from York, she must let him see that the imagined barriers between them were set aside. She had already declared her love for him. Perhaps now he would believe her protestations as sincere. Giving the subject close consideration, she knew that he must have *some* kind of feeling for her in return.

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Mrs. Bowden and her daughters left at last. Scarcely had the door closed behind them, than Aunt Hetta began to give her bitter opinion of supposed friends.

"I am sure I shall never be able to bring myself to be civil to *her* again!" she declared. "The deceitful creature! She knew full well about the Garths and kept it to herself. How she must have laughed behind her hand, thinking of my marriage-plans for Clarissa. No—do not speak to me, miss!" she said angrily to her daughter. "You shamed me before a neighbour, bidding me hold my tongue in that insolent manner. I cannot *think* what the world is coming to! As if 'twere not enough to nourish a *highwayman* to my bosom! Now 'twould appear I have the misfortune of mothering an ungrateful daughter!"

Clarissa pulled a wry face at Antonia and moved to stare from the window of the snow-covered garden.

"Mama—I declare you are quite old-fashioned!" she said across her shoulder. "You should be glad I have no true regard for Dominic, nor he for me. I'd wed him—highwayman or no, if *that* were the case!"

Henrietta Wade gave a moan of anguish and clapped a hand dramatically to her brow.

"Antonia, my dear!" she wailed. "My daughter is quite without sensibility. I must go to my room. Help me, dearest niece, for I feel one of my headaches coming on!"

Once Mrs. Wade had retired to her room, with a maid in attendance, Clarissa said to Antonia, her voice filled with curiosity:

"Tonia, you were very quiet when Mrs. Bowden spoke of the Garths. Can it be that you knew already

about Dominic being a highwayman? You are more close with Justin than you will admit!"

Antonia joined her cousin beside the fire. They were alone now, for Kit had gone to the stables when the Bowdens left.

"Well, Tonia?" persisted Clarissa, her tone friendly for once.

Antonia gave a sigh.

"You ask a deal of questions, Clarissa," she parried. "I will admit that a little of what Mrs. Bowden said was known to me already."

"Oh!" said Clarissa, then she added almost diffidently: "And you *are* close with Justin?"

Antonia's colour rose.

"I love Justin Garth," she said quietly. "I am glad that you said you would have wed Dominic despite everything—if you had loved him. I feel this way about Justin, you see. Nothing can ever alter my feeling for him. There, Clarissa!" she added ruefully. "Does that answer you?"

Her cousin gave a thoughtful nod.

"I have not always been kind to you, Tonia," she admitted, "for I have a jealous nature! But I wish you happy in all sincerity. Are you and Justin to be wed?"

Antonia looked away.

"He has not made me an offer, if that is what you mean," she said almost inaudibly.

"Oh, I am sure he will do so!" said Clarissa confidently. "Is he wealthy, do you think, Tonia?"

"Wealthy? I have not the slightest idea!" said Antonia, her grey eyes wide. "Rich or poor, it is all one to me."

"But not to *me!*" declared Clarissa with a grin. She kneeled before her cousin's chair with a flounce of silken skirts. "Tonia, if you make a wealthy marriage, promise you will not forget your poor Clarissa!" she beseeched. "I would vastly enjoy a season in London, you see, and if Justin could afford—"

Antonia rose to her feet, drawing Clarissa up with her. She found she could laugh now with real amusement.

"You *devious* little schemer!" she choked at last, then linked her arm through Clarissa's. "Come, love, you must go to your mother and make her a pretty apology. Then her headache will vanish away." She regarded the younger girl for a moment, then added, "Clarissa—you really are a spoiled brat!"

"Oh, I know it!" confessed her cousin cheerfully. "But all the same, I promise you I would secure myself a rich husband in only *half* a London season!"

She ran laughingly from the room and Antonia stared after her, her own smile fading. If only Justin would return! Once the business of Dominic was resolved, she must prove as single-minded as her selfish little cousin and prove to him that she loved him truly.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

DOMINIC GARTH's freedom was bought for a considerable sum of money. He had cheated the hangman and the threat of transportation too—on this occasion at least. Mr. Bowden had ridden over to Rawling House to relate the joyful tidings, but his expression accorded ill with the glad news he bore.

"He is a graceless young scamp," said Mr. Bowden to Henrietta Wade, shaking his head frowningly. "I fear we will hear one day in the future that he has been less fortunate. Yes—he is free and has returned home."

"And—and Justin?" ventured Antonia from her aunt's side. Her heart had lurched uncomfortably when she realised Mr. Bowden had come alone. "Has Justin returned to his home also?"

Aunt Hetta gave an unladylike snort.

"Antonia, my dear, we must concern ourselves no further with these Garths! Suffice it to say that Dominic has escaped the hangman's noose. Our association with them must surely be at an end!"

"No, dear lady! Do not say that," said Mr. Bowden, giving Antonia a reassuring smile. "Justin has shown up very creditably in this affair. I am not at liberty to regale you with the whole of it, but you may depend upon me when I say that he is both a brave and worthy

fellow. Were he to offer for the hand of either of my daughters, I would accept with alacrity."

"Justin Garth is to offer for Patricia or Caroline?" asked the bewildered Mrs. Wade. "I had not thought him to have shown the least partiality for your daughters, sir!"

"Nor has he!" retorted her neighbour cheerily. "His eyes, he assures me, have been set in an entirely different direction from the very start of his visit."

"Oh!" murmured Mrs. Wade doubtfully. "On whom could he have fixed his attention in our part of the world? I am assured he has met no one but your daughters, my Clarissa and Antonia here."

"Quite so!" agreed Mr. Bowden blandly, winking openly at Antonia so that she blushed. "Yet I have it on the best of authority that he has lost his heart completely in our Yorkshire countryside!"

Clarissa gave a smothered laugh and her mother turned startled eyes upon her.

"No—not I, Mama!" chuckled Clarissa. "Come, you mentioned four names and have eliminated three. Do not be so *dense*, my dear mother!"

Henrietta Wade opened her mouth to rebuke her daughter's lack of respect. It remained open when she observed her niece to be blushing furiously.

"Antonia?" she said slowly. "But what about poor William? You have too much good sense to wish to ally yourself with *highwaymen*. Think of our family reputation, my love!"

Antonia glared at her chuckling cousin and the beaming Mr. Bowden.

"You are *impossible*—all of you!" she declared. "I

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have not received a marriage offer from Justin and perhaps I never shall do so! As for the family reputation—”

Suddenly she found herself thinking of Captain Starr and of his painful, unnecessary death. Family reputation, indeed! It was more than likely that the head of her own family had lived the violent life of a highwayman for many years and had recently ended it in equal violence.

Her lips trembled and she could not go on. To her horror she found that tears were coursing down her cheeks.

“I—I wish you would all l-leave me alone!” she stammered, and fled upstairs to receive comfort from the motherly, uncomprehending arms of old Ellen.

* * *

The door opened and Justin Garth entered to look across at the drooping shoulders of the girl seated at the harp.

“Antonia?” he said.

She rose to her feet and moved across the room to greet him, outwardly composed but with a fast-beating heart. Justin smiled slowly and took her hands in his, holding her at arm's length.

“Clarissa said I should find you in here,” he said. “She said we would be uninterrupted if we had anything important to discuss.”

Antonia gazed up into his teasing blue eyes and her colour rose.

“Clarissa said—*what?*” she said direfully.

Justin chuckled and drew her gently into his arms.

“Your cousin said a great deal more,” he admitted,

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and Antonia felt him shake with mirth. She pushed her hands against his chest and looked up, attempting to read his expression and noting at the same time that he had found time to remove his beard during his absence. His blue eyes gleamed with merriment and she winced.

"Justin, d-did my dear cousin say anything of a—a season in London?" she managed.

He nodded cheerfully.

"Oh, she assured me that *half* a season would be sufficient for her purpose!" he said, his lips quivering.

"Why did she suppose that her going to London might interest *you*?" asked Antonia in strangled tones, as she considered just what she would say to Clarissa on their next meeting.

"Oh—it appears that I am to foot the bill for her expenses," explained Justin.

Antonia gave a groan and hid her face in his shirt. His arms tightened about her and she felt him rest his cheek against her hair.

"It seems there is a condition attached to my offering Clarissa a London season," he pursued relentlessly.

Antonia attempted to draw away and found that she could not do so.

"A—a condition?" she whispered into his chest.

She felt him nod.

"M-mm. Clarissa says she would not dream of accepting a stay in London at my expense unless you and I are wed first. I will than be her cousin and it will be perfectly proper for me to pay her bills, you see! An ingenious child, is she not?"

With a sudden movement he held Antonia away from him and looked down into her flushed face.

"Well, love? Surely you cannot bring yourself to disappoint your poor cousin? If we refuse her she might turn back her sights on to Dominic and that would not do at all!"

"D-Dominic?" began Antonia, refusing to meet his eyes. "What of Dominic, Justin?"

"I've washed my hands of him," said Justin pleasantly. "Come, Antonia, stop procrastinating. May I have an answer, ma'am?"

Antonia gave a low, shaky laugh and she looked up at last.

"You may, sir, if you will but ask the question!" she said.

"I refuse to go down upon my knees," said Justin, "for this coat is new for the occasion."

"It suits the blue of your eyes," murmured Antonia. "But—the question, please?"

Justin took a deep breath.

"Do you know," he said thoughtfully, "that I have never before asked anyone this particular question? Miss Rawling—will you do me the honour of consenting to become my wife?"

"Yes, please, Justin!" said Antonia meekly. "Oh, yes!"

He gave a sigh.

"Then your cousin may have her season," he said with relief and kissed her upturned face.

They moved at length to sit upon the couch. Eventually Antonia recovered from the daze into which happiness had set her and ventured to speak of Dominic.

"He's chastened if not changed," said Justin. "I feel the thought of the noose will be with him for some

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considerable time to come. Perhaps he has at last seen the error of his ways!"

"Mrs. Bowden has spoken of the way in which you have protected him on many occasions," said Antonia tentatively. "Why do you feel this to be necessary, Justin?"

He settled his arm comfortably around her, kissed her cheek and grimaced.

"I'd best begin at the beginning, love, for half a tale will never satisfy you!"

She wrinkled her nose at him and he grinned and went on:

"Dom's father died when my cousin was but a child and when his mother remarried she chose a man of wealth for the sake of her son. You see, Dom's father was a gambler, love. He was deep in debt when he shot himself and his wife was in desperate straits. In order to pay off the debts and keep safe the family home for her son, she married the richest man she could find. The man she chose is wealthy beyond compare, but he is self-made and his money came through trade. Dom has held this against both his mother and his stepfather since he was old enough to understand it and has done his utmost to make life uncomfortable for the pair of them. He has been utterly selfish and I hope the truth of this has been brought home to him at last."

Justin paused.

"His father shot himself?" whispered Antonia. "Then my sympathy is with Dominic's mother, poor lady. Your cousin should have known that she had *his* interest at heart."

"She had my sympathy also," nodded Justin. "You

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see, love, she has always been my favourite aunt. Also, I like and respect Henry Barrett, her husband."

Antonia suddenly remembered something.

"Aunt Hetta said that Dominic was heir to both a title and a fortune," she said, puzzled. "How can this be, Justin, in the light of what you have just told me?"

Justin shrugged.

"The title has been his since his father's death," he said, "but Dom has always said he has no use for being Sir Dominic without money to back up his title."

"Oh!" murmured Antonia thoughtfully. "Then he is not heir to a fortune, after all? Aunt Hetta was convinced she had the facts right."

Justin grinned.

"I wondered exactly what made her look with favour upon Dom from the very moment she clapped eyes on him!" he said cheerfully. "Well, love, there *is* a fortune but it will never belong to Dom unless he mends his ways."

"His stepfather's money?" said Antonia, light beginning to dawn upon her.

Justin gave a decisive nod.

"There you have it! Henry Barrett knew full well that he had been married for his money, but he cared too much for Dom's Mama to let this influence him. Yet our Mr. Barrett has a business head on his shoulders. He has given Cousin Dominic until his twenty-fifth birthday to show that he is capable of living a useful and respectable life. If Dom fails to satisfy this demand, he will be cut off without a shilling and his stepfather's fortune is to be willed to Barrett relatives."

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Antonia stared thoughtfully up at Justin as they sat together upon the couch.

"I suppose Dominic is furious at the condition imposed upon his inheritance?" she said slowly.

Justin gave a wry nod.

"My idiot cousin is determined to do his utmost to *avoid* inheriting," he told her. "Hence his wild behaviour of the past few years. Henry Barrett's patience has begun to wear a little thin and I've a feeling he might not wait until Dom is twenty-five to make that threatened will. Nor should I blame him. He is a very good sort of fellow and has done his best to like and understand his graceless stepson."

"Dominic referred to you as his watch-dog," said Antonia. "Justin—why have you done so much to cover up your cousin's misdemeanours—even going to the length of fighting a duel on his behalf? Surely he does not deserve to inherit a fortune? Why must you trouble yourself in the face of his ingratitude?"

Justin sighed and smoothed her hair with a gentle finger.

"That is all at an end. Dom may now go to the devil for all I care!" he confessed. "I did not like to think of his mother sacrificing herself in remarriage for Dom's worthless sake, only to have the generous gesture thrown back in her face. Perhaps I was a trifle pompous in endeavouring to show him the error of his ways!" he smiled. His smile faded as he added: "What have you learned about the duel, love?"

Antonia coloured and told him that Mrs. Bowden had revealed the true facts.

"You were very noble to remain silent and take up

the challenge yourself," she said wonderingly. "Dominic does not deserve your aid, but I realise now that you did it for his mother's sake." She shivered. "But—a *duel*, Justin! You might have been killed!"

"It was an ill-managed affair," confessed Justin. "*He* fired into the air and I aimed to miss him by a half-mile! Unfortunately, my shot glanced off a tree and had the ill-luck to hit my opponent in the shoulder. He has since recovered and has forgiven my clumsiness," he added.

"Oh—I am glad to hear of that!" said Antonia in relief. "I did not like to think you might be obliged to flee the country."

"Would you not have come with me, Toni-love?" mocked Justin.

Antonia freed herself from his arms and stood up abruptly.

"Please do not call me that," she begged. "Oh, Justin! I cannot help but think Captain Starr was really my father. I will never know for certain now if I am a highwayman's daughter!"

Justin rose and put an arm about her shoulders.

"Come—you must set that behind you, love!" he said firmly. "Think instead that your father died on the battlefield many years ago. You must have no doubt of this—if only for your brother's sake. Soon you will be gone from here and Kit will do very well without you—with the aid of your worthy Mr. Drew! Come, promise you will never speak again of Captain Starr?"

Antonia was silent for a moment, then she nodded.

"I suppose you are right, Justin. I must forget Captain Starr except for thinking of *Betsy* as his daughter.

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What is to become of her? I am grateful to her for helping you to escape from that horrid Jed Filey, but if she stays here she will be a constant reminder of things best forgotten."

"My aunt in London will take her," said Justin. "Yes, that is it! We shall send Betsy to London with Clarissa when your cousin goes for that promised season. Betsy need never return. She will be well provided for."

Before Antonia could respond to this generous offer, the door opened and Clarissa entered in a whirl of silken skirts.

"Dear, kind cousin-to-be Justin! Then I am to go to London after all? I have been listening at the door these few minutes past but could hear nothing at all! I declare you must have been *whispering*! But *London* caught my ears!" She took Antonia by the hands. "Tonia, you must be wed in the spring for Justin must be my cousin in time for the next season! Oh—I must go to tell Mama!"

The door closed behind Clarissa with a joyous crash and Justin turned to Antonia, his blue eyes gently teasing.

"Shall we say next spring, love?" he murmured with raised eyebrows. "You see, I cannot fail poor Clarissa!"

Antonia put her hand in his, not trusting herself to speak, and they moved together to look from the window at the softly falling snow. By the time winter was behind them, the violence and anxiety of the past weeks should be a fading memory. She turned slowly from the wintry scene.

"A spring wedding is a remarkably happy thought, Justin!" she said with a tremulous smile and lifted her face to his.



THE HIGHWAYMAN'S DAUGHTER

One summer night in 1776, the Rawling family coach is held up by a masked bandit and his band of highwaymen. From that moment on, lovely Antonia Rawling is made abruptly and uncomfortably aware that there may be a close and unquestionable link between her own respectable family and the notorious highwayman, Captain Starr; a link that can dash all promise for her future.

Antonia finds herself beset by suspicion and doubt. And when her aunt welcomes the cousins Justin and Dominic Garth into their circle, Antonia's concern grows deeper, for there is something about the cousins that troubles her ... something that brings to mind the highwaymen with Captain Starr.

What ensues is a drama of violence, abduction—and thwarted romance until Antonia herself secures the truth that sets her free from her past.